

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA

3

AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE





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"A dark...
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Foll said in
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Raphael

Ex-Archangel, Butler of Zagan's castle. He's a renowned figure who is known for killing nearly five hundred sorcerers. This time around, he's wearing a full suit of armor to fit in at a sorcerer's evening ball.

Chastille Lillqvist

A girl who inherited a Sacred Sword, and earned the title Master of the Sacred Sword. Though she is a master of the blade, who is far too serious and thus easily deceived. After taking to investigate a sorcerer, she was saved by Zagan, and is now conflicted by her feelings for him, a sorcerer who is made out to be evil.

Valefor

A young dragon who attacked Zagan to steal his Archdemon powers because she desires strength. Her nickname is Foil. After Zagan turns the tables on her, she is forced to stay at the castle and help Nephely with chores.

Zagan

An orphan who was abducted by a certain sorcerer as a child, but then slaughtered him and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephely at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings.

Nephelia

An elf with snow-white hair. Her nickname is Nephely. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, her's was extraordinarily high, so she was treated as a "cursed child." Little by little, she grows to feel affection for Zagan, who told her that "he needed her."

***“[Thou art the
one who shines
like the stars.
The one who
embraces
balance, and
arbitrates over
good and evil.]”***

**Nephy’s body
was wrapped in
the light of
stardust as she
floated in the
air with the
moon at her
back.**

**Regardless of
the cost, she
wanted to help
her. She
wanted to save
her. And as she
prayed for that
outcome,
words began to
naturally flow
from her
mouth.**



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Prologue

“Nephy, I wanna eat that.”

“It’s almost time for dinner, so you can’t, Foll.”

The trade town Kianoides. The day was coming to an end as Nephy joined hands with a young girl and walked along within the darkening town. After shopping and meeting with their friends Chastille and Manuela, they were on the way home.

Due to her long, white hair that covered as far as her waist, which was tied up with a crimson ribbon, pointy ears, and azure eyes, it was clear that she was an elf. Today, she was wearing her usual one piece dress, a white apron, boots which had fatigue-reducing sorcery cast on them, and a boorish collar that didn’t match her dainty body. It was a slave’s collar, but this one was proof of her precious connection to her lord.

The one holding hands with Nephy while pointing at the candies lined up on the street’s storefronts was Foll. From her looks, she appeared to be a young girl with vibrant green hair that was covered by a cat-eared hoodie. It was a native dress which had white and scarlet as basic tones, but under the hood, she had two horns sticking out. She took on the appearance of a human, but she was a dragon. Such was the case, but she was still childishly asking for candy just as her appearance would suggest.

It was true that the sweet scent wafting over also stimulated Nephy’s hunger, but she pulled on Foll’s hand and answered her resolutely. If they had sweets at this time, then it would spoil their appetite for dinner. Zagan, the head of their household, was kind, but he had an extreme hate for wasting food.

Nephy was holding a basket large enough to snugly fit a human child, the inside of which was already crammed with ingredients. Having her pleading denied, Foll puffed out her cheeks and gazed up at Nephy with a look filled with expectations.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Tonight is oven baked chicken and corn soup. Also... let’s see... Shall I make pudding for dessert?”

“Ah, then can we head back quickly?”

In return for not buying candy, Nephy decided to make dessert, which made Foll’s amber eyes sparkle. After that, her green braids swung about, and she happily pulled on Nephy’s hand to urge her on.

“Let’s see. I do believe that Master Zagan has gotten quite hungry now, too.”

“Flying?”

Foll was still young for a dragon, but in her original form, she was still large enough to carry several people at once, so sometimes Nephy would take a ride on her. Nephy’s expression itself didn’t change, but her pointy ears quivered, and then twitched happily about while she shook her head.

“Sir Raphael is also there, so even if we do not hurry, it will be alright.”

While saying that, she was reminded of the slightly delighted face that her lord would show during a meal, and Nephy also quickened her pace as a result.

A month had already passed since Foll came to Zagan’s castle. The sight of the two of them in town had already become familiar, and the people who passed by them, as well as the clerks from the shops, all pointed delighted gazes toward them.

And at that exact moment...

“Nephy, look out!” Suddenly, Foll pushed Nephy down.

And as Nephy toppled to the ground, she ended up letting go of her basket. The ingredients inside were thrown to the ground and scattered about. And right where they were, many arrows made of light came pouring down incessantly.

We were attacked... by sorcery?

By the time Nephy started getting back up, Foll had already quickly gotten to her feet and raised her guard. As it turned out, the young girl was staring down a shadowy figure whose body was wrapped in a robe.

Since their face was completely concealed, Nephy couldn’t tell what race they were, but they were surely a child, and if not that, a woman. Even through the slackly-worn robes, she could tell that it was a person with a small build. Eventually, the shadowy figure then stretched its arm from the opening of their robe... and pointed at Nephy.

“Are you... Nephelia?”

As she’d thought, it was likely a woman. After all, the voice Nephy’d heard was akin to a tumbling chime. However, hearing that voice made Nephy feel uneasy. And it seemed that was also the case for Foll. Her childish expression showed no small amount of unrest on the surface.

Nephy was left unable to reply, and the lips that could be seen from beneath the shadowy figure’s robe warped into the shape of a smile.

“There is no need to even make sure, huh...? Die.”

And then, those bright red lips muttered something.

“_____”

An indescribable chill ran down Nephy's spine as she heard those words.

“I won't let you,” Foll said as she stepped forward.

“Don't, Foll!” Hugging Foll tightly, Nephy threw herself prone. Immediately following that, many spears made of crystal came pouring down from the sky. They were aimed not only at Nephy, but even on the surrounding shops and pedestrians. Debris and blood flew through the air, and shrieks filled the area.

“Ah, please stop it!” Nephy screamed. It wasn't like she thought anything would change. It was just a scream. Or at least, that was supposed to be the case, but... Along with the sound of a clear clang, the crystal spears shattered to pieces.

This person... hurt the people of this town! Nephy could tell that the inside of her head was heating up. In her mind, the people of this town received Nephy kindly just like Zagan did, so it was just as unforgivable for someone to hurt them as Zagan himself. And, as if prostrating themselves before that violent emotion, the shattered fragments of crystal changed directions.

“What?”

The fragments of crystal took to the skies, raining down on the robed figure repeatedly. And, as the figure groaned and leaped to the side, the crystal rain took chase right after her.

Just by wishing for it to happen, miracles occurred. Even the elves, who possessed power far beyond human comprehension, feared its users as cursed children. This was Nephy's power... Mysticism.

And right now, control of the crystals was entirely in Nephy's hands, and they were cornering the one who created them.

“Amazing...” said Foll, in a dumbfounded voice.

The robed figure wove a magic circle in the air and took on several crystals with it. Condensing mana to create a shield was fundamental sorcery, but depending on the caster's ability, it could become unbreakable.

Compared to Master Zagan's shield, this is flimsy like a piece of paper.

The magic shield endured for a moment, but didn't even last a single second. And along with a chilling wrath, Nephy pulverized said shield. However, within that moment that didn't even amount to a second, it seemed the woman had played her next hand. Crystal spears crept out from under her feet once more, then collided with the rain of crystals that Nephy was manipulating. And this time, those two types of crystals were smashed apart without leaving even a fragment behind.

“...Even a good for nothing... is still a white-haired elf, huh?” The

robed woman groaned as her hood fell down.

Nephy had her breath taken away as the woman's face was revealed. Next to her, Foll was also in shock. That was because... what appeared under the hood was a girl's face. And just like Nephy, she had pointed ears. An elf. Her age was likely also around Nephy's. Her long hair, which went down to her waist, was also white. Her lack of expression, the mana one could sense on one's skin, and above all else... That girl had the exact same face as Nephy.

"A dark... Nephy...?" Foll said in a trembling voice.

It was a girl who could only be described as 'Dark Nephy.' The only difference was the color of her skin and eyes. In contrast with Nephy's snow-white skin and azure eyes, the girl before them had dark brown skin and golden eyes.

Thinking back on it, the reason Nephy was able to react to the first surprise attack may have been because that mana was so similar in nature to her own.

Dark Nephy stared fixedly back at Nephy for a moment, but then suddenly averted her gaze.

"The magic circle of the Archdemon, huh? What a dreadful power."

"Huh...? What are you talking about?" Nephy gulped audibly as she followed that girl's face.

Suddenly realizing what was going on, she looked around at her surroundings. The buildings that had been destroyed by the crystal spears had returned to their original state. Even the people who were pierced through just had blank looks as they sat on their butts. And then, as if wrapping up the town, a massive magic circle was drawn on the ground.

Is this... Master Zagan's sorcery? While Nephy was learning sorcery, she understood that there was a sort of idiosyncrasy to the way the circuits in a magic circle were lined up by sorcerers. And the make of this magic circle fit Zagan's.

Dark Nephy then put her hood back on and quietly spread out her robe.

"Please wait! Just who are—"

"I... am you... cursed Nephelia," Dark Nephy replied. And while Nephy was shaken by those words, Dark Nephy's figure distorted like a haze and vanished. With that, the fight had ended, and it seemed that Nephy could finally be at ease. After verifying that she and Foll were safe, Nephy ran over to the people of the town.

"So you're okay, Nephy."

"Nephy, were you the one who fixed all this?"

Even though an incident had occurred where the town was nearly destroyed, there were no voices there that blamed Nephy or Foll.

After that, Foll ran off as if she had found something.

“Look at this, Nephy,” Foll said as she picked up a single piece of stationery.

The addressee was Zagan, but the name of the sender made Nephy’s body stiff in shock.

—To Archdemon Zagan, From Archdemon Bifrons—

Chapter I: I'll Get Angry Even if the One Who Raised Their Hand Against My Bride is a Beautiful Girl

“...Like I thought, it just won't work out like sorcery, huh?”

Evening. In the archives of Zagan's castle. Zagan was groaning while glaring at a single scrap of paper which had a mysterious crest design on it. It was similar to a sorcery circuit, but also different.

Normal crests made use of circuits formed into straight lines and circles as a basic theme, and each individual shape was not all that complicated. In fact, many of them could be strung together in such a fashion and included in a magic circle in any form. However, the crests on the scrap of paper used nothing but lines which twisted like snakes, and not only did they not use straight lines, they frequently used dots.

It looked like many of the letters were joined together, but if that were the case, he couldn't tell at all where to delineate them, or if they were all just a single letter in the first place, or even if it was any form of vocabulary at all.

This was something Zagan copied off the engraving on the greatsword standing upright in front of his eyes. Atop a sinister pedestal carved out of obsidian was an unbefittingly beautiful sword. And pallid crests were engraved along its pure white blade. It was a Sacred Sword.

It was one among a series of tools that were used by the church to destroy the king of demons, and was also their greatest weapon against sorcerers. Plus, it was a symbol of their power. There were only twelve of them, and one of those Sacred Swords was within the hands of a king among sorcerers, Archdemon Zagan.

If that fact were made public, then the balance of power between the sorcerers and the church would surely collapse. If he were to threaten the church using that fact as a basis, then he could likely palm it off to an influential person there to build up a fortune. It truly was a treasure which could shake the world.

As for the great Sacred Sword in question, Zagan took a hammer from the table into his hand and tried banging it against the blade without a single hint of any respect. Seeing that the blade was chipped from the impact, he could tell that the strength of the metal itself

wasn't all that great. If the cardinal who idolized the Sacred Sword were to see this action, he would probably go into cardiac arrest. Although, the person in question was already underneath a gravestone.

While investigating the Sacred Sword, Zagan tried to verify the effect of the crests themselves by inserting them into a magic circle, but he was unable to activate any sort of power.

Is there something like a stroke order? Or is it that a ritual is required? Or perhaps simply writing it requires a particular power?

For the time being, Zagan had figured out what the materials used to paint them were and had used the same thing, but they seemed to be unrelated. And, as if unable to hide his fatigue, Zagan rubbed his eyes and looked at his right hand.

A sigil etched by mana then came to the surface of his hand. The Sigil of the Archdemon... It was proof of his status that contained tremendous mana within it.

Zagan had two goals. One was to gain a means of killing demons, and the other was to find a method to destroy the Sigil of the Archdemon.

Without a means to break this thing, I won't be able to kill the twelve other Archdemons.

The reason he was investigating the Sacred Sword was because the crests engraved on it resembled those in the Sigil of the Archdemon. However, he had no choice but to admit that the results of his investigation had not been favorable.

Zagan snapped his fingers in irritation.

"Raphael, you there?"

"Did you call?" A butler appeared out of nowhere, wearing a tailcoat with armor wrapped around his left arm. Even at the best of times, this man had a frightening face, and yet he also had a dreadful scar carved across it from his cheek to his brow that gave him a fiendish look. He seemed to be beyond fifty years old, but from his perfectly straight spine to his tempered body, one could not sense that he had dulled with age at all.

That wasn't all that surprising, really. This man was a former Archangel who killed 499 sorcerers. Having lost his left arm, he was wearing an artificial one made of armor, but his true abilities were still as strong as ever. One month had passed since he and Foll ended up living in Zagan's castle.



Zagan pointed to the Sacred Sword enshrined on the pedestal.

“Raphael, you said that even you don’t understand the crests on this sword, right?”

“I regret to say that it’s exactly as you state.”

“Show me a little of its power.” Without any hesitation at all, Zagan ordered around the former Archangel who held the highest sorcerer kill count in history. After Raphael pulled the Sacred Sword from the obsidian pedestal, he quietly spoke its name.

“Heed my call— Sacred Sword Metatron.”

As he called out to it, the Sacred Sword clad itself in a pallid flame. It was the Flame of Purification that was said to have once struck down the king of demons. Upon touching that flame, all sorcery lost its power without exception. And even an Archdemon wasn’t exempt from that fate.

The faithful butler gripped the Sacred Sword in both hands and slashed at Zagan without hesitation. With a clang, tiny sparks scattered about, and the sword clad in fire was brought to a halt in front of Zagan.

I’ve grabbed hold of a Sacred Sword and even its wielder. There is no hand I will not put to use. An elaborate and complicated magic circle rose up in front of Zagan as he thought of his good fortune.

“...Hmm. As I thought, the power itself doesn’t come from the blade. Seems it’s fired out by those crests to me.”

The sword itself was only made of hard metal. What truly made it a Sacred Sword were the crests engraved on it. There was no mistaking that fact, but...

Somehow, I can’t tell how it works at all...

It wasn’t complicated in the same way as sorcery circuits. No, it even looked like it was a simple one phrase spell, yet the principle behind it eluded Zagan. Even after going out of his way to have the owner put on a show, he was still in a predicament.

Despite being the youngest to attain the title of Archdemon in history, his confidence as a sorcerer was smashed. And so, Zagan let out a sigh as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Good work. That’s enough.”

“As you wish,” Raphael exclaimed. And then, gazing at Zagan, who appeared to be at his wits’ end, he continued, “My liege, are you also having difficulties clarifying the mysteries of the Sacred Sword?”

“That’s right. Look, there doesn’t seem to be any mistaking that these things are letters, but they appear to be from a completely lost tradition. They don’t resemble any letters currently in existence, and also seem to have a different structure from circuits.”

A lost tradition meant traditions and cultures that had been

reduced to nothingness. Obviously, if there was nobody left to pass it on, then it wouldn't even be left in books. The church managed the distribution of Sacred Swords, but even they didn't understand the meaning of the crest design.

Reconstructing such information would take an expert many years, so although Zagan was the youngest sorcerer in history to arrive at the seat of an Archdemon, it wasn't something that could be done quickly. Finding that annoying, Zagan glared at the Sacred Sword that Raphael was gripping.

"Honestly speaking, it's to the point where thinking of that sword itself as a living being called a 'Sacred Sword' is far more convincing."

What Zagan shifted his focus to was the portion that he had struck with a hammer earlier. It certainly should have been chipped, but instead appeared to be perfectly sharp. It seemed the sword had the ability to mend itself. The butler then nodded and replied.

"I see. We do not know if that's necessarily wrong, either," Raphael hoisted his Sacred Sword up as he said that, then said, "Sacred Swords choose their owners. Even when I touch this sword, on rare occasions, I have felt something resembling a will. Moreover, despite being the same weapon, it is said that the way its power is displayed differs depending on the owner."

"Now that you mention it, yours is flame and Chastille's is light, huh?"

It wasn't like one surpassed the other or anything, but that may have meant the swords' attributes shifted to match their wielder's. And what decided what those were was likely the 'will of the Sacred Sword' that Raphael spoke of.

If it had a will, then that meant it was possible to consider it something closer to a living being in the form of a sword.

However, since it has the form of a sword, then there should be an original creator of some sort.

A sword was something made to be wielded by people. And if there was someone who made them, then a manufacturing method existed at some point.

"Rather than analyzing the sword itself, investigating that may be the more realistic option."

Of course, there were many things that were made clear by investigating the Sacred Swords. By comparing against the information in books from Archdemon Palace, Zagan found out that those letters were once referred to as Celestian. They seemed to be the letters used by divinity from antiquity, but it was said that it was lost alongside their departure from this world.

It was a completely unknown language. The meaning and even the pronunciation wasn't clear, so it would be difficult to obtain more

information on it. As Zagan got lost in thought, Raphael finally set the Sacred Sword back down on the pedestal.

“Is it about time that I return the Sacred Sword to you?”

“If I must wield it, then you may order me to do so.”

And while they were talking about such things... Zagan’s brow shot up.

Kianoides’ barrier activated? The barrier he had prepared in the case that battle broke out in town to restore any damage done to the buildings had automatically activated. He made it so that it would react even if Nephy or Foll fought as well, so...

Zagan jumped to his feet as such thoughts came to mind.

“We’ll talk later. It seems something has happened around Nephy and Foll.”

And while he had a rather grave expression on his face, Nephy and Foll returned safely only a moment later.



“What happened?” After looking at Nephy and Foll’s faces as they came back, Zagan’s expression became even more grim. For the time being, the two of them didn’t appear to be injured. Thanks to the magic circle he set up in Kianoides activating, both their clothes showed no signs of being torn or dirtied, either. They were both the type of people who didn’t show much emotion on their faces, so they looked normal at a glance.

My barrier can’t heal the wounds of living beings, after all.

Since Zagan specialized in sorcery that enhanced his own physical body, he couldn’t make the barrier heal the wounds of others. Lately, the number of people he had to protect had suddenly multiplied, so he was seriously thinking of studying and correcting that weakness of his, though.

However, even without wounds, the way Foll wouldn’t let go of Nephy’s hand and the way Nephy’s ears were haggardly drooping down made it clear that something had happened. And while Zagan stared fixedly at them, waiting for their reply, the first one to open her mouth was Foll.

“Zagan, you know...” However, as she tried to say something, Nephy tightly squeezed on her hand. “...It’s nothing.”

It seemed Nephy didn’t want to talk about it... or rather, she didn’t want anyone to hear about it.

I guess, for the time being, I’ll search for the culprit later and strangle them to death.

There were witnesses in the town, so it wouldn’t be all that difficult to follow their tracks. However, that was something he could do later. Right now, there was something he had to do first. Zagan

begin by squatting down in front of Foll, matching her line of sight.

"Foll, are you alright?" Zagan believed that something had happened to her. And as he asked her that, Foll returned a small nod.

"...I'm... okay," Foll said, looking up at Nephy with a worried gaze. And so, Zagan gently brushed Foll's head.

"Thank goodness. Raphael has started making preparations for dinner in the kitchen. Tell him to get you some juice. You've earned it."

Saying that, Zagan looked over to Raphael, and the old butler sensed what Zagan wanted to say and nodded.

"Then do come with me, Foll. I have taken possession of some fresh fruits. I shall render them into crushed refuse just as you damn well wish."

Can't he just normally say 'I'll make that juice you like for you'...?

The butler made a fiendish smile, as if to say he was going to go destroy a whole town, which made Zagan bite down his sigh. Nevertheless, Foll had also gotten used to it.

"Mmm..." After reluctantly letting go of Nephy's hand, Foll followed Raphael into the kitchen and left. Waiting until he could no longer see her back, Zagan looked up at Nephy while still squatting down.

"Ah... Um, how do I put it... If it's now, then it seems nobody will hear you but me..." Zagan awkwardly let his gaze wander around while muttering that, and Nephy cast her eyes down.

"My... apologies..." Nephy apologized, even though there was no need for her to do so.

So this really is hard to talk about, huh?

If it was something that she didn't even want to talk to Zagan about, then at the very least, it must have been shocking, which only led to him worrying about it all the more. However, he knew that trying to force the information out of her would be a bad call.

But then, what could he do? Nephy was a rather reserved person at heart, and Zagan was poor at conversation, too. To this very day, he had still not conveyed the words 'I love you' to her. Since the two of them were like that, they had learned to sense what the other meant through gestures and changes in expression, yet Zagan was completely unable to sense what had happened at all. Still, Zagan was not such a feeble-minded Archdemon that he would pull back just because he couldn't understand.

If she isn't willing to share, then I'll just shut up and comfort her until she is!

Once before, when he was feeling down, Nephy had let him use her lap as a pillow. And for some reason, that made his heart feel at ease. That was surely what 'being comforted' felt like. Having thought

that far, Zagan shook his head in denial.

Calm down. I mean, how exactly am I supposed to give her a lap pillow in this situation?! Moreover, just because he was happy from having Nephy do that, it didn't mean that doing the same thing for her would accomplish the same result.

Zagan desperately thought it over. And looking at Zagan do so, Nephy muttered in a whispered voice.

"Um, Master Zagan, the truth is..."

I see. I just have to make a place where it's fine for her to have a lap pillow, don't I?! Zagan had a revelation of a great idea and didn't realize that Nephy had begun to say something.

"Hear me, Nephy, let the strength out of your body."

"Uh, ah, yes." Even as her ears quivered in bewilderment, Nephy did as she was told and let the strength out of her shoulders. And after verifying that, Zagan took Nephy and lifted her up into his arms. He was performing a 'princess carry,' it seemed.

"H-Huh? Um, huuuh?" Nephy raised a bewildered voice as her pointy ears turned bright red. And with the anxiety of her feet no longer touching the floor, Nephy reflexively embraced Zagan's neck. Two bulges could be identified even through the apron and one piece dress as she defenselessly pushed up against him.

She's soft, or should I say light... More importantly, what's this nice smell?! Zagan unintentionally threw his head back and almost fell over, but just like that, he began walking briskly with Nephy still in his arms as if it were nothing.

"Ugh, ohhh..."

Nephy was letting out incoherent noises, but Zagan had already lost all sense in his mind from shock and was unable to respond to her at all.

For the time being, Zagan was aware he had made some sort of mistake, but he was far too committed to give up so soon.



As it turned out, the place Zagan headed to was the archives. *Rather than the throne room, it's more cramped and cozy here.*

Since it was hard to be seen from outside, it would likely be effective for settling one's state of mind. Though it was somewhat late, Zagan realized that the archives were a convenient place for them to be alone.

Perhaps because she had completely lost her mind from shock, Nephy just remained as she was and let Zagan do as he pleased.

...No, she may have been in a complete daze, actually. Her eyes were darting around wildly, and she was clinging onto Zagan's neck the whole time.

Ah, but she can't use my lap as a pillow here.

On top of the archives being beyond its maximum capacity in books, Zagan, and even Foll, frequently made use of the place, so tomes were piled up on the floor. It wasn't all that bad, but there wasn't really a space for someone to lie down.

After worrying over that a little, Zagan plunked down on the spot while still carrying Nephy. As a sorcerer, Zagan felt no fatigue at all from carrying a light girl like her. Still, rather than standing up, he thought that Nephy would be more relieved if he was sitting down...

Unfortunately, an uncomfortable silence reigned throughout the room.

After a little while, Nephy questioned him in a greatly perplexed voice.

"U-Um, Master Zagan, just what is this...?"

I don't know either! Even though he was supposed to be comforting Nephy, he no longer knew what to do. And as if glossing over his unrest, a tap rang out from Zagan's heel.

The books that he had begun to read, which were left atop a table, floated up on their own and flew down before Zagan.

"There's still time until dinner... I'm going to continue reading."

And so, he ended up creating an exceedingly incomprehensible space where he was reading with the girl he loved seated on his lap. Yet, curiously enough, he didn't sense any signs that Nephy disliked it.

Shortly thereafter, Nephy seemed unable to bear her embarrassment anymore and began wriggling about with slight movements, but since Zagan was embracing her in his arms with a book open out in front, she was unable to get off his lap.

Before long, perhaps having resigned herself to her fate, Nephy slightly corrected her posture atop Zagan's lap. And then, without turning back to look at Zagan, she began muttering as if talking to herself.

"Um, Master Zagan, about what I was trying to say earlier..."

"...What of it?"

No matter how he thought of it, Nephy was trying to start a serious conversation. But was their current setup really the correct way to hear her out? He wasn't sure, but he also felt like it wouldn't be any good to let Nephy down right away, either.

Simply nodding in return took all his effort as Zagan agonized over such matters. And regardless of whether she knew of her lord's mental state, Nephy took out a single piece of stationery from her pocket.

"In Kianoides, a certain person handed this over to me."

So that's the culprit who upset Nephy?!

The amount of information that could be gained from a letter did

not stop at the simple contents itself. By analyzing the penmanship, one could probe for who the person in question was. From the quality of the paper and the shape of the stationery, one could find the specifics of where such goods were circulated and even where they were obtained. Furthermore, the mere act of having to hold a writing utensil with one's hand made it so the person in question had no choice but to directly touch the letter. And when they did, they would have left a trace of mana on it without exception.

The point being, Zagan would have no trouble finding the culprit with just a single piece of stationery. Shifting his gaze over to the stationery that consisted of only a single page, Zagan squinted his eyes.

"An invitation to an evening ball... What?" Moreover, the sender was Archdemon Bifrons.

Bifrons... That's the next youngest Archdemon, right?

Until Zagan became an Archdemon, that sorcerer was the youngest in history to do so. And it appeared that this Archdemon Bifrons was the perpetrator who meddled with Nephy. While Zagan struggled to endure his furious anger over that fact, Nephy slightly tilted her head to the side.

"An evening ball... is it?"

"I see. You still don't know about this stuff, huh, Nephy? It's something like a social gathering of fellow sorcerers."

He did think that the image of sorcerers, who were said to have nothing but their own research in their heads, and a social gathering clashed, but that couldn't have been farther from the truth.

"Research costs money. And it's also possible for the knowledge that you want to be monopolized by another sorcerer. So, gatherings like these are the perfect place for sorcerers to meet and barter."

"And Master Zagan, you were invited to such a thing?"

"Well, I won't know unless I take a look inside."

Thinking of it as a written invitation from an Archdemon, he suspected that there was some kind of trap on it, but it turned out there was no sign of the stationery having had sorcery cast on it. There was likely no danger in opening it, then.

And as Zagan once more tapped his heel, the drawer of the table opened, and a knife sitting within with an elaborate ornamental scabbard floated up toward them. The knife then drifted in the air unsteadily and settled down in Nephy's hands.

"Open it and take a look for me."

"Alright."

Having perhaps gotten used to the situation already... or rather, having had something within her gone numb, Nephy replied in her usual monotonous voice and broke the seal of the stationery with the

knife. After that, a single card fell out from within.

“Read it aloud for me.” Zagan thought it would be fine for him to read the letter himself, but assumed making her speak would lighten her mood.

...Well, he also really wanted to hear Nephy’s voice again, too.

Nephy simply nodded as if she held no doubts about it at all.

“Alright. ‘Dear Archdemon Zagan, for the purpose of deepening my relationship with you, my new comrade, I thought of holding an evening ball. P.S.’... Huh?” And there, Nephy’s voice halted. Zagan then questioned her about it in as gentle a voice as he could.

“What’s... written there?”

“...P.S., I would like to invite all concerned residents of your castle. Archdemon Zagan, White Elf Miss Nephelia, Apparition Miss Valefor, ex-Archangel Lord Raphael Hyurandell, and also, the beautiful former maid, the Maiden of the Sacred Sword, Miss Chastille Lillqvist.”

Even Zagan let out a groan upon hearing that.

Which means they’ve been monitoring us for quite a while, huh?

They knew that Chastille was a maid at the castle even though it was only for a few days, and even had a grasp on Foll’s true identity. At the very least, it made sense to assume that this Archdemon had them under surveillance for over a month.

Nephy then continued in a trembling voice.

“By all means, I implore that the five aforementioned people do come by. I await a favorable reply. Archdemon Bifrons.” And with that name, as well as the time and place of the ball, the invitation letter came to an end.

The thirteen Archdemons, huh? When he first confronted the Archdemons, Zagan felt fear. Not wanting to leave Nephy in a place where she would get involved with such monsters, he even tried to keep her away from him.

It was a memory of unsightly and wretched defeat. But even so, Zagan snorted as he raised his voice.

“That’s quite the provocative invitation.”

Hearing him raise his voice in a delighted manner, Nephy turned her head in surprise. And as Zagan finally caught sight of her face, he noticed her ears slacken as if she was shaken.

“Master Zagan, do you intend to go?”

Zagan tilted his head to the side.

“An Archdemon has gone out of their way to send a personal invitation. There’s no reason not to comply, don’t you think?”

At any rate, they’re opponents I’ll have to crush eventually. Just how much of a difference in power was there between the other Archdemons and Zagan? This was surely a good opportunity for him

to ascertain that. Above all else, there was a need for Zagan to properly teach them just how little benefit there was in making an enemy of him.

The reason he raised a festival of blood for any ignorant intruders was for that very purpose, so even if his opponent was an Archdemon, that would not change. On the contrary, precisely because they were Archdemons, he had to make it clear to them, or else those kinds of events would simply repeat themselves.

Upon hearing that, Nephy spread her eyes wide open, and she opened her mouth to speak hesitantly.

"I am well aware that it is impertinent of me to say this, but... do you not think... that this is something like a trap?"

"Huh...? Isn't it obviously a trap?"

Zagan would rather someone tell him if there were any other possibilities. The fact that Zagan cherished Nephy more than his own life was something the other Archdemons already knew. On top of going as far as using the worst method of provocation in setting up an attack on Nephy, sending an invitation letter was just like politely informing him 'We set up a trap, but don't run away, okay?'

"Th-Then..." Nephy's ears quivered as if she was unable to hide her bewilderment.

I see. She just went through a terrible experience, so this must be terrifying for her.

Zagan tried smiling to give Nephy some peace of mind, but he was aware that his smile looked villainous. He wanted to stroke her head, but it seemed like a strange way of comforting her, and both of Zagan's hands were already occupied anyways. Nephy was also already on top of his lap, so he couldn't use his feet to encourage her, either.

Then, how exactly am I supposed to ease her mind? At such times, Zagan knew all too well that he wasn't able to speak the appropriate words. Having said that, since she was already in his lap, he felt that even embracing her wouldn't do much.

And in the mere seconds where Zagan's thoughts were in chaos, he came to the conclusion that the portion of his body that had the freedom to move that was closest to Nephy was his head.

Now that I think of it, there should be a method of comforting someone by nuzzling your forehead against them!

From time to time, Zagan would see Nephy and Foll talking in such a way. Foll would raise her voice like it was ticklish, but she would make a delighted face. There was no mistaking it. And so—

"Eek?"

Zagan pressed his face against Nephy's cheek. Though she was quite slender, there was an unexpectedly mushy sensation. It was

silky, similar to powdered sugar, and he could sense her temperature was considerably high.

And with a string of thwaps, Nephy's ears violently shook and struck Zagan's face repeatedly due to her unrest.

Ah, crap, this is definitely wrong! Though he tried to touch her with his forehead, since he was embracing her from behind, he ended up nuzzling her with his cheek instead. Thinking about it carefully, he realized he was just rubbing his cheek against hers.



If that were to suddenly happen, anybody would be bewildered. However, even knowing that it was a mistake, it was too late to walk it back. After clearing out his throat with a cough, Zagan began speaking.

“Be it an Archdemon, or be it a trap, it’s a person who made you make such a face. It won’t do if I don’t give them a good slugging.”

“O-Oh...” Nephy’s shaking ears stretched out with a flick as if they’d stiffened up. He ended up saying it like he was deceiving her, but that was truly the one point Zagan himself could not let slide.

Before long, perhaps having lost her strength, Nephy’s ears drooped down.

“...Master Zagan, you’ve seen through everything, haven’t you?”

“That’s right... is what I want to say, but it’s not like I know what actually happened. About all I can tell is that you’re feeling down, Nephy.”

He wanted to know exactly what happened, but he also didn’t want to make her talk about it against her will.

If it’s something that’s got her this down, then it’d have to be something like an encounter with a survivor from her hometown, huh?

However, Nephy had already spoken of that secret to Zagan. She would surely be shaken, but not enough to keep her so silent.

Then, is it something else? Just what that could be wasn’t something Zagan could figure out. As he kept silent, waiting for her to continue, Nephy eventually timidly opened her mouth to speak.

“My apologies, Master Zagan. Right now, I still don’t know... how to speak of it.”

“I see. Then speak of it when you’re able to.”

“...Yes.” A single word spoken in hesitation. However, her voice made it clear that the shadow hanging over her had thinned out considerably. And then, without turning to look at Zagan, Nephy hesitantly asked him a question.

“Um, Master Zagan.”

“What is it?”

“That’s... um... Were you... comforting me... I wonder?”

“Does it not seem like I am?”

There’s no way it does, right?! Even Zagan himself knew that. But still, he couldn’t think of any other method.

Nephy then smiled as if she understood all of Zagan’s feelings.

“Thank you very much. I feel... much more at ease now.”

“I see.”

Thank goodness Nephy is such a sympathetic girl... He thought that from the bottom of his heart.

After that, Nephy began wriggling about in Zagan’s lap.

“But... um... could you... please... let me down... now? Um... it’s... embarrassing...”

Even having lost his cool, the current situation was strange in all sorts of ways. There was no way Nephy wouldn’t be embarrassed. After all, even Zagan was. Or well, that should have been the case, but...

Somehow, I have a hunch that I should try cornering her just a little more, Zagan thought as he feigned ignorance while pretending to continue reading.

“It seems it will still be some time before we can eat. I’m going to continue reading.”

“...Master Zagan, that’s mean.”

Even as she let out what sounded like reproachful words, Nephy didn’t try to escape.

Well, Nephy does work a little too much sometimes, so this is fine. Letting her rest every once in a while, even if he had to employ such cruel methods, was surely his role.

After that, Nephy casually looked over to the sword standing up in a nook of the archives. It was the Sacred Sword Metatron that was entrusted to Zagan by Raphael. Because of the mess that happened in town, Zagan missed his chance to return it. It wasn’t even inside a sheath. And while gazing at that Sacred Sword, Nephy muttered something as if talking to herself.

“Me...ta...tron...? Is it the name of the sword, I wonder?”

“Yeah, it’s Raphael’s Sacred Sword. It’s about time that I return it to...” Zagan felt his own face stiffen up as he spoke before he continued, “Nephy... just now... What did you say?”

The name of a Sacred Sword was apparently a closely-guarded secret. Raphael had only ever said it a single time, and Zagan and Foll had never spoken it since. There was no way that Nephy should have known the Sacred Sword’s name.

“Huh...? Um, are you talking about those letters?”

And this time, Zagan’s eyes shot wide open.

“Nephy, you can read the letters on the Sacred Sword?”

And with a bob, Nephy nodded.

“Yes. I don’t really understand the meaning of the word, but I do know how to speak them...”

Zagan messed up his attempt to comfort Nephy, but thanks to that, he obtained an enormous clue.



“You were invited to an Archdemon’s evening ball?!”

The next day, early in the afternoon, Zagan’s undesirable friend, Barbatos, exclaimed that in a booming voice. As always, he had an

unhealthy looking face with shadows under his eyes, and he ruffled his unkempt black hair while acting surprised.

They were currently in the throne room, but were sitting at the center of the area one step below the stage of the throne itself. Additionally, there was a small table prepared with enough seats for four, and Zagan, Barbatos, Nephy, and Foll were crowded around it.

Several varieties of confectioneries and tea were laid out on the table. However, less than half of what started as a mountain of confectioneries was left. That was because Foll had been stuffing them into her mouth one by one.

And while they were talking, Zagan took a sip from his teacup, and at her own discretion, Nephy picked up the teapot.

“Master Zagan, would you like some more tea?”

“Well, I’ll leave it to you.” His cup had just about emptied out. And after Zagan took one last sip to drain it, he nodded. Nephy cheerfully tipped the teapot at that, which made Zagan feel rather serene.

Seems yesterday’s matters aren’t dragging on, huh?

When she came back to the castle, she was feeling terribly down, but in the morning, she had her usual cheerful expression... Well, it wasn’t really an expression, but her ears were standing up straight as if she was in a good mood. After Nephy put down the pot, Zagan took his teacup in hand and started by enjoying the fragrance.

“Hmm, a good aroma. Today’s tea is all the more delicious, I see.”

“Your praise brings me the height of joy, Master Zagan.”

It felt like his mood had improved due to the fragrance of the tea being more prominent than usual. And as Zagan matched that with a smile, Barbatos raised his voice in a reproachful manner.

“...You know, even though I’m all surprised here, why the hell are you all just drinking tea like it’s nothing?”

“Shut it, Barbatos. Why should I react each and every time a bastard like you is surprised by something?”

“Look, it’s fine to not show me any hospitality, but can you at least treat me like a human here?”

While scratching his head like it was just tiresome, Zagan returned his teacup to its saucer.

“So, what are you so surprised about?” Zagan asked him in response, which made Barbatos mutter some words with an astonished look on his face.

“Well you know, when you say evening ball... it’s that, right? A sorcerer’s evening ball, right?”

“The invitation is from a king among sorcerers, so what else could it be?”

An evening ball could also typically signify a high society

gathering of nobles. It wasn't like he didn't understand the feeling of wanting to verify that, but as long as it was organized by a sorcerer, it was difficult to think of any possibility other than a sorcerer's evening ball. Something like a noble's evening ball held no meaning at all to sorcerers, as they wouldn't even take any interest in them.

Barbatos then shook his head, his expression seemingly annoyed by Zagan's lack of comprehension.

"I mean, would an Archdemon really hold an evening ball...?"

Yes, that fact also baffled Zagan.

If an Archdemon wants something, all they have to do is command it to be so.

Archdemons were arrogant and mighty, the absolute peak of sorcerers. Since an evening ball was a place for sorcerers to exchange knowledge and assets, it was also an assembly of the weak. Why would an Archdemon show up, let alone host one?

Well, it's being held to set up a trap, I guess.

Barbatos then let out a snort.

"Well, that's quite the shady story, huh? Let this wise man give you a warning: there's an eighty to ninety percent chance that it's a trap. Be careful."

"Far from eighty percent, I'd say. It's obviously just a hundred percent, right? The hell are you even saying?" Zagan made an exasperated face, and Barbatos was left at a loss for words.

Perhaps having found Barbatos to be pitiful like that, in an unusual turn, Foll spoke out comforting words for him.

"Zagan, the handyman isn't very smart. It's better to say it in a kinder way."

"Well, I suppose that's true. My bad, Barbatos. I spoke too harshly."

"Dammit, don't fucking make fun of me, you pricks! Also, who the hell is a handyman, you little brat?!"

While Barbatos started to heat up, Foll made a displeased face and pulled the plate of confectioneries toward herself.

"A lowly sorcerer who comes here just for Nephys's snacks shouldn't act so self-important. Besides, when it comes to age, I've lived three times as long as you, handyman."

"Right back at you, brat. Why are you being so damn condescending?"

"Barbatos, you should be the one minding your damn mouth. Branding my daughter a little brat is more than enough reason for me to kill you, you know?"

As Zagan coldly pushed him aside, Barbatos hung his head down like he had a headache.

"How should I put this, Zagan... Aren't you pampering her a bit

too much?"

"What...? How exactly am I pampering her?"

"The hell are you saying?! She's eating sweets on top of your lap even though you have a guest here!"

With a 'hmm,' Zagan looked down at his own lap. Foll had been sitting on Zagan's lap for the entirety of his conversation with Barbatos. And as he stared at her, Foll leaned back completely, gluing her back to Zagan, and tilted her head to the side as if asking 'I can't?' coyly. Of course, there was no way she couldn't. And Zagan made a declaration as if he didn't harbor a single doubt about it.

"You're the bastard who barged in while I was enjoying some tea. I don't understand why I would ever drive away my daughter just to hear your prattling..."

In the first place, Zagan never considered Barbatos a guest. Ever since Foll officially became Zagan's adopted daughter, it had become a daily routine for them to have a snack together like this after lunch. This was the time of day that Zagan put his research on hold so that they could enjoy some quality time together.

Last night, the fact that Zagan put Nephy on his lap and wouldn't let her go ended up getting leaked to Foll, and following that flow, the young girl was sitting on his lap today.

"...No, that's enough of that already."

And while the shadows around his eyes grew ever deeper, Barbatos let out a sigh.

"So what, you planning on accepting that Archdemon's invitation?"

"They sent quite a ridiculous invitation, after all. I'm not so lenient that I'll simply ignore it," Zagan said, glancing at Barbatos with a scowl all the while. Then, he continued, "So? It's not like you came here to bark out such worthless complaints, right?"

And as he cut to the chase, Barbatos formed a broad grin.

"Kehehe, listen, that elf over there was attacked by a sorcerer in Kianoides yesterday, so I thought maybe you wanted some info..."

"...Urgh." Zagan was aware that his rage showed on his face.

I don't know who the hell that was, but I'll make them regret ever being born, even if it takes hundreds of years!

He didn't think it was possible that it would be the Archdemon who sent him the invitation, but even if it was, Zagan would not hesitate. And Zagan then made a smile as his eyes became bloodshot.

"Speak. If the information is beneficial to me, then I'll hand over as much of a reward as you want."

"Oh, now you're talking... Huh, eek?" Barbatos let out a shriek as he reeled back.

As he looked around, Zagan noticed Foll had deployed several

magic circles and was about to unleash an attack. And so, he gently brushed Foll's head to soothe her.

"There, there. I know you don't like this guy's face, but don't just suddenly kill him."

"What's wrong with my face?"

After Zagan admonished her, Foll undid her magic circles for the time being, but still growled at Barbatos menacingly. It was unusual to see Foll be aggressive to such an extent, so Zagan folded his arms and thought deeply on the matter.

Just like yesterday with Nephy, she doesn't want me to hear it... Is that what this means?

He then took a glance over to Nephy, who wasn't making as extreme a reaction as the other day, but he could tell that she was tightly gripping her skirt under the table. Seemed she needed a little more time before she could open her heart about it.

Nephy may have been doing so because she was the first to realize Foll's reaction, or perhaps there was another particular reason for it. At any rate, it was Zagan's honest opinion that he wanted to respect his daughter's will. And so, giving in, Zagan once more stroked Foll's head.

"...Got it. I'll wait until Nephy talks about it, so don't get so angry."

Foll looked up and stared back in wonder as he informed her of his decision. Nephy also stared in wonder for a single instant, but she then bashfully cast her gaze downward. It was surely not just Zagan's imagination that her ears were quivering with a twitch in a happy manner. Foll then muttered like she found it strange.

"Zagan, can you really read minds after all?"

"Who knows."

Zagan said, shrugging his shoulders, then spoke to Barbatos, saying, "That's how it is. I don't need your information this time."

"...Is that really alright? I'm sure you'll regret it if you don't take this seriously."

"Like I care."

Although, it seemed like Barbatos wasn't only doing this to look for a reward.

Something bad may end up happening, huh...? Nevertheless, Zagan said he would wait. In that case, he wouldn't probe any further. He would show that he could protect everything regardless. That was the figure of an Archdemon that Zagan believed in.

Yet Barbatos hung on as if saying that there was no backing out anymore.

"No, but you know..."

"Zagan, the handyman seems to have a loose tongue. It's better to

finish him.”

“You punk, don’t you value human life?!”

You’re one to talk... This was the very man who had used the chaos of Archdemon Marchosias’ death to abduct young women for sacrificial rituals. Treating life as precious after all that felt far too hypocritical.

Putting that aside, there was only one confectionery left on the table. Zagan was told its name was a macaron. It was a confectionery that had a crunchy texture like a cookie, but contained cream on the inside. It had a multi-colored variety of outward appearances, giving it a brilliant look, but even more than that, its rich sweetness had good affinity with tea, so it was one of the confectioneries Zagan quite liked. Watching the young girl’s hand stop reaching out for confectioneries, Zagan tilted his head to the side.

“Foll, there’s still one more left, you know?”

“That’s Zagan’s.”

It was likely that she wanted to eat them all herself, yet she still left just the last one aside. Foll was gazing at the macaron reluctantly. Somehow feeling extremely charmed by that, Zagan took the last confectionery and gave it a bite.

“Mmm... Today’s sweets are certainly a level more delicious than normal, aren’t they?”

Foll then nodded her head as her green braids swayed about.

“Nephy... seemed to be in a good mood since the morning. It’s probably... thanks to that.”

“F-Foll!”

“Getting on your lap feels good, but I don’t think it’s just that. Zagan, did you do something else?”

“Huh...? No, I’m not sure what you mean.”

The only thing that came to mind was how he put her on his lap and made her embarrassed. That had failed in all sorts of ways, though...

Zagan then glanced over to see Nephy’s reaction and noticed that her mouth was flapping open and shut while both her hands wandered around in the air. It seemed she had lost her composure due to her embarrassment.

Wow... So cute!

From her reaction, he could tell that Foll’s remark hit the nail on the head.

I don’t know what had such an effect, but I guess that’s why she put some extra spirit into making the sweets and tea... And this girl, who put so much effort into such trivial things, was unbearably adorable.

Foll then hopped off of Zagan’s lap.

“It’s about time I return Zagan’s lap to Nephy.”

“It’s not like I particularly want to sit on Master Zagan’s lap again, you know?” Nephy puffed out her cheeks, and Zagan visibly tapped his lap for her.

“You don’t want to?”

“...Master Zagan, that’s mean.” Nephy showed signs of wavering for just an instant, but immediately remembered that Barbatos was there. After half rising to her feet, she shook her head.

If Barbatos weren’t there, she may have actually sat down on his lap. No, she surely would have. There were times where he would commit a crime of conscience by utterly failing at both his speech and conduct, but even when Zagan made exaggerated and unreasonable demands, Nephy would always do her best to meet his expectations in the end.

Ah, dammit, will that ass Barbatos just leave already...? If only that man weren’t here, Zagan could once more see Nephy agonizing over the sense of comfort atop his lap. And as Zagan glared at Barbatos full of bloodlust for some reason, he then threw the last piece of macaron into his mouth and stood up.

“Now then, I have things to attend to. It’s about time we go, Nephy.”

“Alright.” As if feeling relieved, yet somehow disappointed, the tips of Nephy’s ears quivered as she stood up. In truth, he wanted to persist until Nephy ran out of patience and sat on his lap, but unfortunately, Zagan had plans for the day.

Barbatos knit his brows at his words, however.

“So, what, you gotta make preparations for the evening ball or something?”

“Something like that.”

While Barbatos made a puzzled face, Zagan took out the invitation letter for the evening ball.

“The invitation says to bring along Chastille, as well.”

There was no particular need to abide by it with foolish honesty, but the opponent was an Archdemon. Even if Zagan didn’t bring her along, it was likely she would be made to participate in the evening ball against her will.

That girl is awkward even at the best of times, after all...

If he didn’t at least talk to her about it, he could already see her half on the verge of tears before an Archdemon. Honestly, he felt that he didn’t really have a reason to look out for her to such an extent, but this whole situation was his fault in the end. Giving her the silent treatment would have left him with a bad taste in his mouth. Plus, there was also the fact that she was Nephy’s friend, and Zagan didn’t particularly hate her, either. That was why he was planning on going to see her together with Nephy. Upon hearing Chastille’s name,

Barbatos made a tiresome face.

“On that note, how long do I gotta keep looking out for that woman?”

And in response to that, Zagan stared at Barbatos in wonder.

Ah, now that I think of it, I never gave him a timeline, did I? About a month ago, Chastille’s life was being targeted by someone within the church. At that time, Zagan ordered Barbatos to protect her over the course of events. A whole month had passed since then, but it appeared that this man faithfully continued to protect Chastille. After thinking about it a little, Zagan tilted his head to the side with a composed expression.

“Did I say there would be a time limit?”

“Ugh... Shit, I thought you were being too lavish. This is a scam, dammit, a real scam.” With a groan, Barbatos then suddenly remembered something and continued speaking, “Actually, why was she even invited, anyway?”

“All the residents of my castle, including the ones who served temporarily, were invited. They likely planned to call over everyone involved with me.”

After Zagan replied as such, for some reason, Barbatos smiled devilishly as he brushed back his unkempt hair.

“Haaah... I see. Well, having an Archdemon show respect to me ain’t all that bad a feeling, I guess. If that’s how it is, I’ll go along with you, too.”

“What...? Your name wasn’t written down, though.”

“Wait, really? Why not?”

“Like I care.”

And this time, Barbatos broke down into tears.

This guy is such a pain in the ass.

However, even when discouraged, Barbatos remained cocky.

“No, wait just a tick here... If all of you jerks are invited to the evening ball, then doesn’t that mean this castle and Archdemon Palace will be empty?”

Archdemon Palace was the name of Archdemon Marchosias’ castle. Its management was fundamentally left to Raphael and Foll, and though Foll would return whenever it was time to eat, she spent the daytime over there investigating. Today as well, while Zagan and Nephy were going to visit the town, Foll was planning on heading toward Archdemon Palace.

Zagan then nodded like it was no big deal.

“Well, that’s how it is.”

“That’s quite careless of you, don’t you think? While you’re away, why don’t you have little old me just take a teensy look around?”

“Zagan, as I thought, it’d be better to just finish this thing off,”

Foll coldly declared.

And with a vein popping out on his brow in anger, Barbatos barked back.

“You damn brat... Erk, but the one who gets to decide is Zagan. How about it, man?”

“Let’s see... I don’t really mind.”

Foll glared over at Zagan reproachfully as she heard his words.

“Zagan, you’re spoiling the handyman too much. This guy plans on robbing Archdemon Palace.”

“There’s no need to worry. I’ve made it so if an outsider tries to carry anything out, they’ll suffer through a suitable punishment.”

“A suitable punishment...?” Foll tilted her head to the side in wonder, but Barbatos groaned as he vehemently opposed his words.

“You prick, so that really was your doing?! I just narrowly escaped death last time I tried to sneak a grimoire out!”

“...Huh? So it didn’t kill you...”

“Why are you so disappointed?”

It was created so that if anything was removed from Archdemon Palace without Zagan’s consent, then sorcery would activate which could even kill an Archdemon candidate.

Since this guy didn’t die, should I turn up the trap a bit?

As one would expect, it seemed he failed in stealing a grimoire, but this man would surely learn nothing and try doing it again. In that case, there was no meaning to the current trap. Foll then looked like she was frightened of something, and Zagan once more patted her head with a bop.

“Don’t worry, I made it so that it doesn’t react to you or Raphael.”

“Zagan, so skillful.”

And hearing the young girl’s voice of admiration, Zagan tilted his head to the side.

“Isn’t doing at least that much normal?”

If one didn’t at least distinguish between who it was activating against, then all subordinates or family would get caught in it. However, Barbatos was in agreement with Foll.

“There’s no way it’s normal, right? It’s hard enough to get sorcery to distinguish between you and anyone else, dammit.”

“In that case, Nephy and Foll would get caught in it, though.”

“Do you think there’s any sorcerer out there who would give a crap about shit like that?”

Now that he mentioned it, most sorcerers only ever thought about themselves. It was certainly true that there was no need for sorcery that was so selective in who it targeted.

There’s no way in hell I’d allow my own sorcery to hurt Nephy... The first thing he did after Nephy came to his castle was modify all the

traps. At the time, he didn't really think too deeply about it, but thinking back on it, he had never seen that kind of sorcery anywhere before. It seemed that was also a Zagan original.

Zagan then let out a snort with a 'hmpf.'

"It wasn't all that much work. Besides, I can't call myself an Archdemon without being able to do something of that level, right?"

"Yeah, yeah..." Barbatos stood up from his seat with a disconcerted expression as he said that. Then, he used sorcery to spread out a shadow at his feet and began sinking into it, but right at the end, he suddenly muttered something, as if it had just popped into his mind.

"Oops, that's right. Let me check just in case, but is it really alright for me not to talk?"

As Zagan was about to admonish him, he noticed that Barbatos was not looking at him, but Nephy. Nephy showed slight signs of wavering, but even so, she immediately nodded.

"Haaah... What a waste of effort. How stupid." And while cursing at himself, Barbatos vanished into the shadow and left.

After seeing him off, Nephy tightly pinned down her chest.

"Lord Barbatos... is also kind in some ways, isn't he?"

"Huh? Weren't we just discussing whether to just kill him off or not?"

"Master Zagan, Lord Barbatos is a friend... right?" Nephy muttered like she wasn't all that confident of that fact, and Zagan tilted his head to the side as if her reaction was wholly unexpected.

"No? I don't really feel that way about him..."

"I-Is that so..."

Even while somewhat astonished, Nephy's ears flopped and churned up in a somewhat pleased manner.

Barbatos was irritating, but Zagan was satisfied to see Nephy in a good mood.

Chapter II: A Cruise Can Create a Good Atmosphere

Just who was that girl, I wonder...

The day of the evening ball, Nephy was getting dressed inside a clothing store.

Zagan had arranged to have a new dress made for Nephy to wear at the evening ball, but both of them knew nothing about how to put on a dress. Back when Nephy had worn one before, her dress was put on for her, as well.

And the one tightening the strings on Nephy's corset, with her beautiful green wings shaking about, was her good friend Manuela. There was a standing mirror in front of Nephy's eyes, and she was simply standing there with her arms spread out as Manuela continued to put on her dress with praiseworthy skill. After a while of adjusting the strength of the knot, her friend Manuela asked her a question.

"Is the corset painful at all?"

"No. I'm alright."

"If you plan on eating a whole lot, then I can loosen it a bit?"

"I won't eat that much," Nephy replied while intending to make a bitter smile as the tips of her ears quivered. However, even as she did so, what Nephy's heart was still worried about was the Dark Nephy who attacked her in Kianoides.

Zagan did comfort her, but that girl would surely be at the evening ball they were headed to. Thinking about how she would once more encounter her, Nephy ended up being frightened.

I... am you— What exactly did that mean? Looking at her own figure reflected in the mirror, Nephy suddenly tried touching her cheek. If the colors on Nephy's face were inverted, then that girl's was exactly the same.

Above all else, she was a cursed child with snow-white hair just like Nephy. However, her eyes were warped with hatred. Compared to Nephy, who had thrown anything and everything away, those eyes were like antipodes.

And above even that, the power that girl wielded was frightening. It was sorcery that manipulated crystals. It was certainly a terrifying power, but if asked whether they surpassed the sorcery Zagan and Foll wielded, then the answer was a definite no. However, having begun her studies in sorcery under Zagan, Nephy understood. *I could tell, just*

what that person was saying...

That was a power with a different structure than the sorcery those two wielded — a power close to mysticism. While thinking it was dreadful, Nephy hijacked her power with ‘that language’ in the next instant and was able to command it herself.

That was why the words of Dark Nephy stabbed at her heart. ‘Those words’ were surely something bad. And yet, Nephy understood their meaning, and probably, even just speaking them...

Will I also... end up like that, I wonder...?

To detest something, to calmly kill people, wielding that terrifying power in such a horrid manner. Would Zagan give her his love if she were like that? No, he surely would not. If she clung to him, he would definitely never abandon Nephy. However, she would simply become a parasite to him... a hindrance.

Being reduced to serving no purpose like that would be unbearable. The reason why Nephy returned to Zagan’s service after being driven out of the castle was because she wanted to support him. That was why Nephy was unable to open her heart about the matter, even to Zagan. And as she held her own shoulders and trembled, a hand gently cradled her arm.

“Nephy, you alright?”

It was Manuela. Before Nephy even realized it, she had finished putting on the dress. It was a dress with a monochrome color tone, which used white as an underlying theme, while its main points were made of black ornaments. There was also a deep crimson ribbon arranged around her chest that gave off a striking impression. Adding on the fact that it was arranged for her by Zagan, Nephy thought that the dress was more than she deserved.

However, Nephy shook her head as if there was nothing going on at all.

“I’m fine. I was just... doing a little thinking.”

“You don’t look fine at all, though...”

Manuela then pinched Nephy’s squishy cheeks.

“Nephy, even at the best of times, the muscles in your face are stiff, yet right now, it looks like a mask. You think it’s fine to make that face when you’re going to a party with your master?”

“That’s... not... fine.”

“Right? Then maybe it’s better to talk about what happened.”

In Manuela’s own way, she was telling Nephy that she would give her advice. Nephy was naturally thankful for her thoughts, but it was something she hadn’t even brought up to Zagan yet. It was not something she could so easily put into words.

And, as if she could see through Nephy’s heart, Manuela peered at Nephy’s face in the mirror.

“Is it about... that sorcerer who went wild in town recently that looked just like you, Nephy?”

Nephy's body shook with a start. It didn't seem like Manuela had seen it herself, but if it was to the point where she heard of it, then it would mean that it had become a rumor in town or something. Manuela then put on a coy smile.

“Your shock shows on your face right away, you know?” Manuela wrapped her green wings around Nephy's body from behind as she said that, then continued with, “Was that girl... Family? Or an acquaintance, maybe?”

“...No, I do not think... that we're acquainted.” Nephy had never seen her in the elven village where she lived. And honestly, if she was from the village, then she surely would've heard rumors of a girl who was in the same boat as her.

“...It's just... I really... didn't like her.”

“Well, she is the type of girl who'd suddenly launch an attack right in the middle of town, so that makes sense.”

“...I don't... want to... ever end up like her.” And as Nephy said that, barely wringing her voice out, Manuela rubbed her face against Nephy's cheek like Zagan did the other day.

“Silly Nephy. There's no way you'd end up like that, right?”

Manuela didn't know... that Nephy understood the language Dark Nephy was using, and that Nephy manipulated that girl's power as if it were her own. However, while Nephy was unable to respond to her, Manuela continued speaking as if she found it strange.

“If you're that worried about it, just come back to my place again. Your big sis will turn you back into the usual Nephy anytime... Or what, you don't believe in me?”

“That's not... the case.”

“Then it's fine, right? Nephy, you've got me and your master with you. There's also little Foll and all the people in town, too!”

Nephy's chest grew hot. She, who had shut down her heart due to loneliness, was now being treated kindly by Zagan, Manuela, and everyone in town.

“...But, if I cling onto somebody like that, I feel like I'll end up hating myself.”

As Nephy spoke those words while groaning, Manuela hit her head with a thunk.

“Nephy, that's not called ‘clinging.’ It's called ‘relying on someone,’ right?”

“Relying on someone...”

Nephy stared at her in astonishment, and Manuela gently brushed her head.

“Yup. You rely on us. Having nobody to rely on is real sad, you

know?"

Is clinging and relying... different?

To Nephy, who had always been alone in the elven village, the two words didn't seem different at all. If she tried to 'cling' to somebody, she would be struck and rejected while being looked down on coldly without exception. 'Relying on someone' should have been the same. After all, it was a sin for a cursed child like her to even exist in the first place.

The fact that Nephy had given up on 'clinging' and 'relying' on others was something that happened when she was extremely young.

Master Zagan... is different from all the elves. She understood this, but had long since forgotten even the concept of trusting people. She didn't know just how to 'rely' on others at all... And then, Manuela spoke up as if seeing through the thoughts in Nephy's heart.

"So, if Zagan were to end up in a situation like yours, what would you want to do?"

"Isn't it obvious? I would want him to tell me about it no matter what, and I would support... Ah..." In the middle of getting worked up to vehemently argue her point, Nephy let out a befuddled voice.

"That's how it is. It doesn't feel bad, right?"

"...You're right."

If Nephy pushed forward by her own will, if she didn't come to a stop and crouch down, that was not 'clinging' onto anyone. It was not the same as being a one-sided parasite. And that realization allowed Nephy to finally take a step forward.

"I will... try talking about it properly with Master Zagan."

This was Nephy's problem. No matter who that Dark Nephy was, and even if something in Nephy were to change by getting involved with her, Nephy had to settle the score.

Yeah, I want Master Zagan to know. That was why she wouldn't worry about it on her own, and instead properly open her heart about it to Zagan. And as Nephy informed her of such, Manuela stroked her head to praise her cute little sister.

"There there. If you ever feel like crying, then just come right over. I'll even keep it a secret from your master."

"If that ever happens, I'll be in your care." Nephy obediently replied.

Finding her response unexpected, Manuela stared back in wonder. And after a while, she formed a smile as if she thought of a no-good prank.

"Fufufu, I'll be waiting, okay? I've got a tooooooon of underwear to recommend at the ready, you know?"

"I will refrain from such things."

Upon seeing her good friend pull out a pair of panties that looked

to be made of nothing but strings, Nephy flatly refused her.





A few hours later, Zagan and the others gathered atop a luxurious passenger boat that could likely even endure a voyage for several months. The boat, which floated on the surface of the continent's largest lake, Suflighida, was the venue for the evening ball held by Archdemon Bifrons. And while gazing out of the window in a guest room, Foll let out a deep sigh.

"We are on a ship... right? Like, on the lake?"

The sheer size of the lake made her believe it could envelop even an island. If they departed into the open sea, then the coast would become a blur, and it was deep enough that no matter what one did, they would not be able to dive all the way to the bottom.

Zagan and the others were led to a large, fully furnished cabin. It had a saloon that could match the size of the entrance hall of a castle, and they even had private bedrooms available for all people present. Foll was peering through a window in the saloon. It was a small inlaid window that couldn't be opened, but due to the height near the deck of the ship, it was possible to see outside.

If one were to assign it a class, it would surely be a first class cabin. In a corner of the saloon was a refrigerator that used sorcery to keep ice from thawing, and inside, there was even a set of chilled liquor available. Other than that, there were also ham, cheese, chocolate, and all sorts of delicate sweets, so they could survive even if trapped in there for days on end.

Aside from Foll, who was sticking to the window, Zagan, Nephy, and Raphael were also all gathered in the room. The three of them were each sitting down as they pleased in separate chairs. Chastille had yet to arrive, however. After all, as an Angelic Knight, if she was seen getting along with Archdemon Zagan within public sight, then there was no telling what enemies she would make. That was why they decided on meeting at the venue.

Zagan was dressed in a robe just as usual, but Nephy and the others were wearing dresses, although it was Manuela who unilaterally decided on that and put all their outfits together. Nephy had a monotone styled dress, and Foll had a dress with a short frilly skirt.

As Zagan's eyes met Nephy's, her pointy ears turned red at the tips, and she cast her gaze downward. When she went to get dressed, she was making a slightly perplexed face, which had him worried, but now she appeared to be alright. Her troubles were settled... or rather, it looked like she had gathered some resolve.

And just from that, Nephy looked all the more beautiful. *Her usual*

maid outfit is adorable, but that dress is really beautiful, isn't it?!

And just how was he supposed to put those feelings into words, exactly? Zagan couldn't do anything other than just letting out a sigh. The sun had already set, but there was still a little time before the evening ball began. And so, they had decided to wait. As they mulled about, wasting time, Zagan lowered his gaze to the sigil on his right hand.

Has Bifrons already arrived? Ever since boarding the boat, Zagan's Sigil of the Archdemon would begin throbbing as if it held heat from time to time. It may have been that another sigil being nearby caused some sort of reaction. Having said that, Nephy and the others were likely feeling just as uneasy as he was. And in that case, there was no way even he could be making such a face.

In an effort to distract himself, Zagan shifted his attention over to Foll. His young daughter's amber eyes were sparkling, and he could tell that she was engrossed with something.

"Is this your first time on a boat?"

"Yep... I mean, there was no need to ride one."

"I see. That's certainly true."

No real reason came to mind as to why a dragon like Foll would go out of her way to ride a human's boat. It may have been possible for her to ride one for fun, but as a young dragon, Foll likely didn't even come down to human habitats on her own, and her father was the dragon extolled as Wise Dragon Orobas. It was somewhat hard to think that he would disguise himself as a human just to ride a boat.

"Do you like it?"

"Mm. It's all wobbly. And fun."

"That's what you like...?" Zagan thought that she was enjoying the view, but it seemed it was the way that the boat rocked that amused her.

Nephy then tilted her head to the side.

"Master Zagan, have you ridden a ship before?" Seeing as she asked that, it appeared this was also Nephy's first time on a boat.

Well, it's said that the hidden elven village is even further north into the mountains than Norden, so that makes sense. She likely never had a chance of coming into contact with any boats. After thinking such thoughts, Zagan earnestly nodded.

"When I was a brat, I fell into the cargo while rummaging through it to try and steal some food, and then someone put the lid on and loaded it on board with me inside. It was good that I got something to eat, but I just narrowly escaped suffocating."

After that, a sailor noticed some sounds and rescued him from the cargo, but then he was mistaken as a stowaway and beat for it... Though, Zagan did eat all the food that he could scavenge in there, so

he couldn't really blame them for that.

Nephy's ears drooped down like she found this heartbreaking, and then she nodded deeply as if it was something that happened to her.

"I understand. I was also unable to endure my hunger once and tried licking up some honey in the food cellar, but was locked in and almost froze to death."

Zagan tried imagining the sight of a young Nephy sneakily licking up honey, and his chest started to grow hot with a pleasant feeling, but he then let out a dangerous voice in response to those inexcusable words.

"Give me a detailed description of the one who put you through such a thing. I will make them taste the same agony."

"I am thankful for the consideration, but I do believe they have already passed on."

The elves of Nephy's village were raided by humans, and the majority of them were killed. Of course, they were the lot who abused Nephy, so Zagan didn't feel a single hint of pity for them, and Nephy had also been putting in efforts lately not to pay it any mind. Nevertheless, Zagan shook his head.

"So what if they're only dead? There are countless sorceries that can wake the dead. It's no big deal, really. Sure, it seems that the undead don't have their five senses, but their personalities remain. There are many ways of bestowing them agony."

It wasn't Zagan's specialty, but if there was a need for it, he would begin studying it immediately. However, Nephy shook her head as her snow-white hair swayed around.

"There's no need for you to go to all that trouble just to get even."

"Hmph... You're so kind, Nephy."

"Master Zagan, you didn't retaliate against the one who locked you in the barrel either, right?"

Zagan became a little flustered by her sound logic.

"Well, the fruits I stole were delicious..."

"Yes. The honey was also very sweet."

"...You two... had a hard life."

While the two of them were sympathizing with each other, Foll shifted her attention over to them in a somewhat astonished manner. Zagan then cleared his throat as if glossing it over.

"Raphael. You have surely at least ridden on a boat before, I assume."

Raphael, who Zagan then shifted his focus over to, was not wearing his usual tailcoat, but was donning a full suit of armor. It was Valefor's armor.

Raphael's face was too well known to sorcerers. That was why he was wearing the armor that Foll manipulated before. There was the

fact that it matched his artificial arm, but it was also still the best choice for hiding his face and assuming another identity.

That was why he was now 'Valefor.' He did remove his helmet within their cabin, though. And after thinking for a bit, Raphael nodded in response.

"Whenever I finished hunting sorcerers to exhaustion, I was immediately dispatched to the next front. Killing sorcerers atop ships was also not a scarce event."

Since Raphael himself had no hostility toward them, this was practically a joke. Raphael then earnestly muttered.

"The lake is nice. The wind is refreshing, too. The salty sea breeze of the ocean sticks to even Anointed Armor. The unpleasantness of it all unintentionally turned my expression grim."

Anointed Armor was armor created by the church to oppose sorcerers. One wearing such armor was said to be able to smash the earth with their bare hands, as they gained superhuman power.

If this man's expression grew any grimmer, he would surely look like an executioner glaring with his scythe at the ready. It compelled Zagan to feel pity for those riding the ship with him.

Zagan then shifted his attention over to Valefor's armor.

"Speaking of armor, is that one at all inconvenient?"

"No. On the contrary, it even feels better than the Anointed Armor I've had to wear for so long. With this, I won't fall behind that damn riffraff of sorcerers."

Raphael was an Angelic Knight. After losing his left arm in the previous battle and getting rid of his Anointed Armor, he would be pushed into a corner even against a low-ranked sorcerer. That was why Zagan rebuilt Valefor's armor as Anointed Armor. Raphael then muttered out in great interest.

"However, my liege, just what is this? The manufacturing process of Anointed Armor is hidden within the church. Even for an Archdemon, it should not be something that can be created at a moment's notice."

"Well, let's see. In the first place, it's a technology that holds no meaning to sorcerers."

Upon hearing that, Raphael tilted his head to the side.

"Anointed Armor is a rare power that is able to oppose a sorcerer. One such as you is one thing, but would it not be a power worth researching for a low-ranked sorcerer?"

"That's unreasonable. Sacred Swords and Anointed Armor have a fundamentally different structure from sorcery, you see. No matter how much you research it, it cannot be applied to sorcery. And putting that aside, a novice sorcerer would not be able to grasp how to research it, so there's no benefit to investigating it."

Even Zagan needed the books from Archdemon Palace, an actual Sacred Sword, and Nephy with him to finally reach this point. And even after going through so much trouble to grasp the manufacturing process, it was a power that didn't mesh together with sorcery at all. In other words, even if a sorcerer researched it, there was nothing to gain. That was why even the Archdemons surely never thought of researching it much. Even in Marchosias' legacy, books which were related to the Sacred Swords and Anointed Armor were few in number.

While they were talking about that, Foll came down from the window and plopped onto Nephy's lap. It seemed that she took an interest from hearing the words 'Sacred Sword.' And as she did that, Nephy naturally went with the flow and brushed the young girl's head. Zagan then began explaining from the beginning.

"Let's see, Raphael. Do you know exactly why the Anointed Armor of the church holds power?"

In response, Raphael shook his head.

"I regret to say that I do not. An inscription is needless for a sword which kills."

"Well, you have a point. It's probably the same for all those Angelic Knights." Even Chastille didn't seem to know the way the Anointed Armor worked, after all.

The guest room had some pen and paper available. And as Zagan took them out from the table, he began drawing a certain crest design.

"Your Anointed Armor has this crest design engraved in it."

The Anointed Armor that Raphael had been wearing was smashed to pieces in the last battle. Since it had lost its power, Zagan accepted it for research purposes, but after trying to analyze it, he found a talisman setup inside with a crest engraved onto it.

Raphael and Foll peered at the crest Zagan drew out.

"This is... the crest design engraved on the Sacred Sword?"

"Yeah. It's not exactly the same, but they're the same kind of letters. It seems engraving these letters gives it power. That means the Sacred Swords and Anointed Armor use the same principle to gain strength."

In other words, Celestian. And then, with a 'however,' Zagan made an expression like the whole process was quite troublesome.

"It seems this thing can't be used as a circuit. There was absolutely no effect when I poured mana into it. There was no meaning in adding on circuits either, and it also appears to be in a different category from dragon sorcery."

In that case, it lost all meaning in being researched from the perspective of a sorcerer. As Zagan then looked over to Foll, the young girl's green braids swayed about as she shook her head.

“Dad may have known something about it, but this isn’t something he ever taught me.”

That was why his research had reached its limit for the time being. And with a ‘hmm,’ Raphael nodded as well.

“So, why are you able to manipulate it now?”

“It’s thanks to Nephy,” Zagan replied, then continued, “Nephy looked at your Sacred Sword and read ‘Metatron’ on it.”

She did so even though the original wielder of the sword, Raphael, didn’t even know the engraving was just the sword’s name. Nephy then humbly nodded.

“Yes. It’s different from the letters used in the elven village, but I may have seen it somewhere before... But, it’s not like I learned how to read or write it, so I don’t really understand the meaning.”

Other than the letters for Metatron and the ones engraved inside the Anointed Armor, Nephy was unable to write anything. But even so, being able to read it was a huge clue. That was because the extent of each individual letter and where delineations occurred had been clarified.

A few days after Nephy made clear how to read them, Zagan’s research into Celestian rapidly progressed. And now, even Zagan was able to read and write it to a certain extent.

“Being able to read it without understanding the meaning should signify that, in any event, these letters are somehow related to Nephy,” Zagan stated, then paused before saying, “I thought that if perhaps Nephy was the one to reproduce the crest design, then it would hold power.”

And that was the reason they were able to prepare Anointed Armor for Raphael.

Moreover, according to Raphael, its performance is apparently higher than regular Anointed Armor.

That likely meant that, rather than someone who didn’t know the meaning reproducing it, it was more effective if someone who understood the letters wrote it.

“So that being the case, the one who rebuilt your armor as Anointed Armor was Nephy. If Nephy weren’t here, this research wouldn’t have gotten this far.”

“It pleases me to be of use to you, Master Zagan.”

They were humble words, but she was happy to be praised, too. Her ears were standing rigid and quivering repeatedly ever so slightly. Raphael then put his hand to his chest and reverently bowed down to her.

“As one would expect of Lady Nephy, the woman who receives the affection of my liege.”

“Wh-Wha...”

And as expected, she wasn't able to endure the praise coming from the two of them. Nephy covered her blushing face, and while gazing pleasantly at her doing so, Zagan continued to speak.

"It's likely that these are the words of elves, or a race close to them. Is there a priest or something in the church with a lineage that's close to that?"

It was probable that there was a close relative of an elf or something similar who manufactured the Anointed Armor, but Celestian should have been a lost language even to the church. That was surely why they were unable to understand its meaning as accurately as Nephy could.

And that's probably why there are only twelve Sacred Swords in existence, too.

Since Celestian was lost, they were unable to produce any more. And having realized that, Foll opened her eyes wide.

"So, can Nephy reproduce a Sacred Sword, too?"

It was an obvious question, which Nephy shook her head at.

"No. I did attempt to do so, but it did not work."

"Hm... It probably needs a ritual that involves a specific location or condition. If it was something so easy to make, then the church and elves would have surely cooperated to make more already."

Of course, she was able to endow it with a certain extent of power, but it couldn't compare with the original Sacred Sword at all.

Even Nephy, who could create Anointed Armor with more power than the original, could only bring up a fraction of the destructive power of the original swords. Unless a great number of conditions were met, then it was unlikely she would ever produce a thirteenth Sacred Sword.

Well, it's not like I really want a Sacred Sword or anything, so whatever.

At most, Zagan was looking to seize a countermeasure against demons and the secrets of the Sigil of the Archdemon. The reason he was investigating the Sacred Swords was because the Sigil of the Archdemon and the Sacred Swords had a point of similarity in their crest designs.

However, Nephy was also unable to recognize the letters in the Sigil of the Archdemon. The sigil resembled Celestian, but it seemed it could not be completely unraveled just by touching upon that language.

I don't think they're completely unrelated, though.

The reason Zagan came to Bifrons' evening ball was in no small part because he hoped to gain new information on it. And after thinking for a while, Zagan tightly gripped his right fist.

"In any case, the research is beginning to show results. Nephy,

from here, I will surely have you cooperate with me on this regularly. Foll, Raphael, I'll have you two put in some work, as well."

"Mm. I'll do my best."

"As you will. You may leave all household matters to me."

"...I expect much of you."

Contrary to his fiendish countenance, Raphael was able to flawlessly handle any and all household chores as a butler. It was to the point where he inadvertently set off the flames of competition within Nephy's heart.

Well, with the burden of household chores that she has to do decreasing, I get to spend more time with Nephy, so I'm thankful for it.

Zagan squinted his eyes once more as he plunked down onto a chair.

"However, the current issue is Bifrons' evening ball."

There was no way they invited Zagan over just to be chums.

"Bifrons is probably planning on starting something worthless during the evening ball. Our opponent is an Archdemon, so don't lose your focus."

As he instructed them to brace themselves, Foll and Raphael both nodded back. And upon seeing that, Nephy tightly gripped her skirt, then opened her mouth to speak, as if finally coming to a conclusion.

"Um, Master Zagan. There is something that I would like to talk to ___"

"Pardon the intrusion."

Without even a knock, the door to the room opened, interrupting what Nephy had to say. *You dare interrupt even though Nephy was about to say something? Can't you read the damn atmosphere?!* The one who opened the door was just a young sorcerer, but Zagan glared at them, eyes full of hatred.

"Eeek, oh no..."

The young sorcerer likely realized that they had just done something wrong, and they fell to their butt and began trembling with a clatter.

Shall I just strangle them to death right here? Zagan began gathering mana within his hand, but Nephy shook her head as if it were no big deal.

"Master Zagan, please suppress your anger. Doesn't this person have some sort of business with you?"

The young sorcerer rapidly nodded their head as if saved by Nephy's kind words.

"U-Um, Archdemon Zagan's companion has just now arrived."

Companion...? Chastille, huh? In that case, he couldn't just ignore it. And so, Zagan reluctantly stood up.

"Got it. I'll go now." And then, he looked over to Nephy.

“Sorry. So, what were you about to say?”

“...No, it was nothing,” Nephys ears drooped down as she said that. It was clear that the wind had been knocked out of her sails.

And here I thought she was going to tell me about who attacked her in town, too... It finally looked like she was going to talk about it, so the sorcerer who cut into their conversation just became more and more annoying to Zagan.

And then, just as they were leaving the guest room...

“Kekekekeke...”

He heard a familiar sounding laughter that seemed wholly unnatural.

“Zagan. What’s wrong?” Zagan came to a stop, and Foll tilted her head to the side curiously as she asked him that question.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

By some chance, we may already be in Bifrons’ web, huh?

With apprehension in his chest that didn’t match the beginning of a banquet at all, Zagan proceeded to the deck of the ship.



“...Zagan, there are a few things that I’d like to make clear,” Chastille said. It seemed she’d been waiting up on the deck for them. She was wearing a scarlet dress that matched her hair, and she had a pure white decorative cloth wrapped around her waist. Looking at it objectively, it wasn’t a bad ensemble. Her Sacred Sword appeared to be hidden somewhere, as she didn’t have a greatsword on her person.

She was apparently the last invitee to board, as the boat quietly began to distance itself from the harbor shortly after they met. The lake flowed off into several rivers, and one of those even led to Kianoides. Chastille had most likely used one of those to get here.

Chastille’s face looked to be on the verge of tears as she stood still on the deck, and she didn’t continue her sentence, which greatly confused Zagan.

“Hmm, what? Let’s hear it.”

Chastille looked around the deck with a pale expression as he questioned her.

“This is... really the venue for the evening ball, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Bifrons has some nice taste to hold it atop a boat.”

The sun had completely set as the group talked in the guest room. As such, the lake was dyed by the colors of the evening, and perhaps because the moon was hidden by clouds, the only source of illumination were the candles placed atop the tables. It was a dim space where distancing oneself several steps from another would make you unable to distinguish the other’s face.

Among the prejudice toward sorcerers propagated by the church, there was something called a sabbath. It was a suspicious ritual where sorcerers who were said to worship the devil gathered.

In reality, most sorcerers didn't even dream of ever cooperating, so they wouldn't hold anything like an assembly. Plus, none of them worshiped anything like a devil. Still, the atmosphere of this venue was so much like a sabbath that any attempt to defend sorcerers was pointless.

Furthermore, the passenger boat was floating completely isolated in an enormous lake. If an assassin from something like the church were to draw near, they would know right away, or they could move the boat at any time and throw them overboard. Anyone who caused problems could be driven away in the same manner too, so it truly was the ideal venue.

As all those facts added up in his mind, Zagan took a look at the state of the boat once more. Its overall length was about the size of an arena from one side to the other. It could surely accommodate even two thousand passengers. It was a sailing ship with three seemingly sturdy masts and multiple sails hanging off them. And on the main deck, multiple tables were lined up, decorated with showy crosses and an assortment of liquor bottles and glasses. Perhaps because it was being handled by sorcery, he couldn't spot anything resembling a crew. All in all, there likely weren't even five ships of such scale in the whole continent.

Seems like they've got some good liquor lined up, too... Zagan took one of the glasses in his hand to try it out and found that it was quite the quality liquor. He still didn't know anything about brands and the such, but it was in no way inferior to what Barbatos had brought him before. And while verifying the state of the deck, Zagan tilted his head to the side.

"So, is there a problem or something?"

"No, I mean..." Chastille made a troubled face and looked around the deck once more, then said, "L-let's just say... that the darkness is fine... but why is there such hair-raising music?"

There was a piano on the corner of the deck, and next to it were several musicians lined up there with violins, flutes, and all sorts of other instruments, playing some ominous music. The singer was an undine... No, a variety of a siren. She was a beautiful girl with blue hair, but the lower half of her body was like that of a snake or a fish or something similar.

Taking everything else on the boat into consideration, she was the one blooming flower of the gloomy evening ball. It was a tasteful decision.

"It's because this is an evening ball. There are many here who

wish to speak without being heard by others. This is likely to help conceal the voices of those types of people.”

In the first place, if a sorcerer was seriously trying to eavesdrop, then that level of noise was meaningless. But even so, it made a difference in the way one felt. And after he explained that to her, Chastille’s face turned even more gloomy as she then pointed at the musicians.

“Then, what are those musicians? Um, they don’t seem to be alive...”

The ones playing the instruments were skeletons with rather basic outfits wrapped around them. It seemed that they were using neatly maintained bones, so they showed no signs of crumbling and did not smell of rot. However, bones could not produce a voice. The siren singer was surrounded by the living dead and trembling in place. Nevertheless, seeing how her song was not affected, even Zagan could admire that she was a pro.

“Well, they’re probably Bifrons’ familiars or something. The singer is surely a hired siren, since her voice isn’t bad at all.”

As the piece rushed toward its climax, a voice like the dying cries of a crow rang out. The simple fact that her throat didn’t cease functioning from that was impressive. Chastille then made a face like she couldn’t believe it.

“Do sorcerers... dance to this kind of music?”

“Huh...? Dance? What are you talking about?” Zagan tilted his head to the side, having found her notion strange from the bottom of his heart, and Nephy’s ears began to quiver with a twitch.

Could it be she has an interest in dancing?

However, Zagan had never danced before. While worrying about what he should do, Chastille then began trembling as she continued speaking.

“It’s a little late to ask, but what exactly is an evening ball to you?”

“What do you mean...? Isn’t it obviously a place where sorcerers strike deals with one another?”

Chastille was completely shocked by his words.

“If that’s how it is, then tell me beforehand! I even ended up coming in this outfit, didn’t I?!” Chastille had come to the evening ball wearing a dress that a noble would wear to a party. Taking another look over her attire, Zagan returned a nod.

“Well, it’s not bad, right?”

“R-Really? Do you think it suits... Wait, that’s not what I mean!”

Zagan then tilted his head to the side like he didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Nephy and Foll are wearing the same kind of clothes. Is there a

problem?”

Even if it was different from a noble's evening ball, it was still a formal gathering. The terms 'sorcerers' and 'etiquette' were contradictory, but it was common sense to wear formal clothes in such situations... Well, Zagan was wearing his usual robe, but that was formal attire to a sorcerer.

Looking around the deck, he could also spot other sorcerers all dressed up here and there. Seemed not all sorcerers ignored their personal appearance like Zagan and Barbatos. Nephy then tried to comfort Chastille.

“It suits you very well, Chastille.”

“O-Oh, Nephy, your dress also suits... Wait, I'm telling you, that's not what I mean.” Chastille looked like she was about to burst into tears at any time as she gripped her skirt, and then she lowered her voice to complain.

“No matter how I think of it, I'm an Angelic Knight, and everyone else around me is a sorcerer, you know?”

Having been told that much, Zagan finally understood what she wanted to say... No, if possible, he didn't actually want to understand it. Zagan then stared at her in astonishment like he couldn't believe it.

“...I don't think it's possible, but... did you come unarmed?”

Of course, since she was wearing such a dress, it was clear she wasn't carrying a greatsword, but he thought that she would at least bring it aboard as luggage. To be able to oppose the physical capabilities of sorcerers, the Angelic Knights of the church wore armor called Anointed Armor that had miracles cast on it. Even Raphael's armor was especially rebuilt for such a task. However, even if Chastille appeared as such, she had a suitable amount of power without wearing Anointed Armor. That was why Zagan found her courage to be admirable, but...

Chastille began trembling in place as she nodded.

“I did... at least bring my Sacred Sword. But... nothing other than that...”

At that, Zagan put his palm to his face.

“I certainly remember saying that this was an evening ball...”

“Isn't an evening ball usually a party?! That's why... I thought you had invited me to... that kind of...”

It wouldn't have been all that strange for the church to raid an evening ball. That was why Zagan never thought it possible that an Archangel, even one like Chastille, would not know of the true nature of his invitation.

Since Zagan couldn't think of what to say, Raphael, with his face hidden using Valefor's helmet, let out a hearty laugh and raised his voice in Zagan's stead.

“Absurd! If it is your sword, which is extolled as the fastest among the Archangels, then you could bring down this damned riffraff of sorcerers before they can even cast a spell, correct? They are not worth such timid behavior.”

“You’re the one who told me to be the banner of the Unification Faction, right?! Then why are you speaking like I’ll kill them?!”

“Because my entire career has been like that!”

This former Archangel, Raphael, was a man who cut down nearly five hundred sorcerers out of legitimate self-defense.

After they yelled at each other, Chastille suddenly went silent. However, all of the sorcerers around them turned their gazes toward her simultaneously.

Well, if you shout in such a loud voice, obviously everyone will hear you...

If a sorcerer felt like it, they could see everything clearly even in such a dim environment. And even with the boisterous music being played by the performers, Chastille and Raphael’s voices resounded throughout the deck. After their display, all the sorcerers who were out on the deck were observing her closely.

“That woman, he said she’s an Angelic Knight, right?”

“She looks familiar... Oh, I know. She’s the only female Archangel.”

“That damn church... You don’t think they’re marching into an evening ball sponsored by an Archdemon, do you?”

“Don’t get so conceited... Shall we kill her?”

As one would expect, the people invited to an Archdemon’s evening ball were rather vicious. Rather than falter, all the sorcerers were seething with anger. Zagan then let out a sigh like the entire situation was utterly tiresome.

If she’s thrown out without even her Anointed Armor, who knows what will end up happening to her...

Inside she was a bit of a wreck, but Chastille’s outer appearance was well in order. After all, she knew that most sorcerers weren’t nearly kind enough to just leave an enemy woman who marched in on them unarmed with her body unsullied.

Zagan then spread out his mantle as he spoke.

“...What a troublesome girl. I suppose I have no choice, then... Come with me.”

Since he didn’t know what Bifrons was trying to start, Zagan didn’t want to stand out unnecessarily. However, he had just lost the opportunity to do so. Intentionally crossing over to the center of the deck, he began walking toward the bow of the boat. Nephy and Foll lined up behind him, and Raphael was also following along at the very back.

And, as if choosing that timing to be appropriate, the performers changed their song and began playing a solemn piece, as Raphael let out a voice of admiration.

“Oh my... This piece is the ‘March of the Demon Lord,’ huh? It seems the musicians there do understand a little.”

Zagan wasn’t familiar with the music, but apparently, it was a piece composed to represent the invasion of the king of demons with his servants in tow. It was a piece which brought about an indescribable sense of unease from sound alone.

And precisely for that reason, gazes of reverence gathered around Zagan as he boldly walked through the crowd. Chastille then raised her voice in a fluster.

“H-Hey, what are you thinking by just walking right into the middle of them?!”

“At times like this, you must conduct yourself boldly. At the very least, if I were to show myself shrinking back at such a time as an Archdemon, then they’ll aim for my head immediately.”

“Th-That certainly may be the case, but...” Chastille let out an anxious voice, but still followed along. And watching Zagan march on as if making a display of his group, the sorcerers began talking in hushed whispers.

“Crap, that’s Zagan.”

“The new Archdemon, huh? Take a look, that one behind him is Apparition Valefor.”

“There was a rumor he got killed, but I guess he chose to serve Zagan...”

As he concealed his face with a helmet modeled after a snake, Raphael was recognized as Apparition Valefor. Despite that, Raphael was walking behind Zagan with an unconcerned look on his face. Next, their gazes gathered upon Nephy.

“Who’s that white-haired elf?”

“It’s that guy’s bride. Be careful. They say Purgatory was torn limb from limb for making a move on her.”

“Yeah. They say that after being tortured for seven days straight, Purgatory was allowed to live after swearing absolute obedience to him.”

Purgatory was Barbatos’ second name. It was true that Zagan beat him up, but it seemed some strangely exaggerated rumors were going around.

Now that I think about it, if Chastille is here, then does that mean Barbatos is also following along?

That man seemed unable to suppress his anger at not being invited to the evening ball. It was entirely possible that he came along using the excuse that he was her escort. After that, all attention was

pointed to Foll, who was tottering along next to Nephy.

“Those horns... Is the small one behind him a dragon?”

“Sure seems like it... I don’t know just who it is, but they say that Zagan killed Raphael over that girl’s ownership.”

“So it’s true that he took out that sorcerer hunter?”

The story of Zagan defeating Raphael was one that he intentionally spread around. The fact that he finished off the ‘most dreadful’ Archangel was effective in dampening the hostility of the fools who would try to usurp him. And it seemed that his plan had gone just as he’d hoped. After they finished discussing his feat, the sorcerers’ attention finally focused on Chastille.

“If that woman is lined up there with him, then does that mean Zagan even has the Maiden of the Sacred Sword under his thumb?”

Chastille then made a dissatisfied face.

“Under your thumb... I don’t really remember ever agreeing to become your subordinate.”

“Just leave it at that. If you don’t, you’ll get killed.”

“Eek,” Chastille clung onto Zagan’s arm as she let out a small shriek. And upon seeing that, the sorcerers all let out a sigh.

“Look at that. That’s the face of a wench.”

“I see... So that means she’s Zagan’s mistress, right?”

Hearing those rumors, Chastille’s face turned bright red.

“Wh-Who’s a wench?!”

“Be quiet, Horse Head. Want to die?” Foll said as she slapped Chastille’s butt.

If Chastille didn’t appear to be part of Zagan’s group, then there was no way that the sorcerers at the evening ball would let her live.

“U-Ugh! Hic...”

Having been scolded even by Foll, Chastille shamefully let out a teary-eyed yelp. Luckily, the hostility from the sorcerers around them had at least been erased. And as they finished crossing over the deck, Zagan took up a position at a seat prepared at the bow of the boat. He wanted to take a seat in the chair and relax, but Chastille was not letting go of his arm.

“...Hey, cut it out.”

“Y-You’re wrong! This is... um... My arm is totally stiff, so...”

This timid girl likely didn’t feel any sense of relief from surviving after walking through a whole group of sorcerers unarmed. And Zagan couldn’t get her off the arm that she was tightly squeezing onto. Looking at that, in an unusual turn, Nephy’s ears began quivering nervously.

“Then, shall I help you?”

“Eek, sh-shorry...”

Nephy’s expression was the same as always, but her voice

contained a cold anger to it. Perhaps because of that, Chastille jumped up and was able to separate herself from Zagan's arm.

Somehow, this kind of reaction from Nephy is quite refreshing...

Nephy was one who would gallantly put in work for Zagan's sake, but there were very few occasions where she would make her desire to monopolize him apparent. There was also the fact that Nephy was bad at declaring her own intentions, but fundamentally, Zagan and Nephy were always alone together. That was why there weren't many opportunities for her to show such an attitude.

Even if she was angry, Zagan was somehow happy at being able to see a face of hers that he usually couldn't see. And while gazing at her, Zagan plopped down into the chair. Since it was the seat at the deepest part of the bow, it was a step above in height and had an unbroken view over the deck. It was truly the location for the guest of honor's seat.

As Zagan sat there, Nephy and Foll lined up on his left, and Chastille and Raphael lined up on his right. Placing his elbow on the elbow rest, he crossed his legs as if making a majestic display and glared over the deck. And as Zagan formed a fearless smile, the sorcerers gulped down nervously.

"So that's... Archdemon Zagan and his confidants, huh?"

"Zagan was practically a nobody until a few months ago, so how did he subjugate that lot?"

It was a pain to put up a strong front, but having them in awe like that was somehow pleasant, too. After gazing over the ship, Zagan picked up a wine glass from the table and shifted his attention over to the gathered sorcerers once more. And at their own discretion, the performers also suddenly stopped their music.

The deck of the boat fell into complete silence.

"It seems that there is no need to even name myself, but I am Zagan. The one who has been entrusted with the lowest seat of the Archdemons."

His voice was not all that loud, but it quietly resounded right to the stern of the ship. And then, Zagan lifted his wine glass high in the air.

"It seems that the sponsor has yet to arrive, but let us enjoy ourselves, gentlemen."

The sorcerers then took glasses into their hands without caring whose it was and exchanged a toast. Though it was just superficial, that was the moment the gathered sorcerers accepted Zagan as an Archdemon.



After Zagan finished drinking his glass of wine, the noisy music

once again began playing. Because of his ostentatious bluff, the hostility that was pointed toward Chastille seemed to have vanished. And having verified that, Zagan let out a disconcerted sigh.

I'm not very good at mimicking such buffoonery. The time he spent at the castle reading through every grimoire he could lay his hands on and relaxing with Nephy and Foll was hundreds of times more worthwhile. Even so, trying to find some worth to it, Zagan looked over the sorcerers on the deck.

It was something the other sorcerers were already employing, but by using sorcery to amplify the light within his eyeballs a slight amount, he ensured his field of vision was the same as if it were daytime.

There are several familiar faces here, huh? Zagan was largely ignorant when it came to information on other sorcerers, but even so, he at least knew the names and faces of the former Archdemon candidates... Having said that, it was only because Barbatos had told him about them before.

At this venue, there was Black Blade Kimaris. And another was someone similar to Enchantress Gremory, but compared to before... Well, somehow, her outer appearance and age looked completely different.

The outer appearance of a sorcerer can't really be relied on, I guess. In the first place, the last time he saw her was in a dimly lit auction venue. It wasn't like he properly confirmed what her face looked like, so it was simply that something felt out of place. And while he was gazing at the deck, Foll suddenly peeked in at his face.

"Zagan, Zagan!" Foll yelled, then spun on the spot playfully as if appealing to him for something.

Now that I think of it, I haven't praised her dress or anything, have I? Unfortunately, before he could do so, Chastille's verbal slip had happened, but that was still a failure for him as a father. And so, Zagan nodded in a bombastic manner.

"It suits you well. Do you like it?"

"Mm. These clothes... are cute."

They're cute cause you're wearing them, though... The young girl was cute in a different way from Nephy. And Zagan naturally began brushing Foll's head in order to accompany his praise. The young dragon partially closed her eyes like it felt good, and next she began pulling on the hems of Nephy's dress.

"What about Nephy's dress?"

"Mm. Isn't it obvious that it's beautiful?"

"...Master Zagan, that's embarrassing."

The tips of her ears lightly dyed red, and Nephy stirred about. Her bashful behavior was even more charming than before, so Zagan

ended up being unintentionally fascinated by it. Eventually, after coughing to clear out his throat, he once more looked at their figures.

“Ah, anyway, how does it feel to wear that dress?”

“Well, I believe it is easy to move in and rather pretty... Um, it is... far better than the one I was wearing when I met you, Master Zagan.”

“I-I see...”

If you say it like that, then I'll lose my cool!



The pure white dress Nephy was wearing when they met was also beautiful, but Zagan wanted to let her wear something a little more cheerful. Since Zagan himself was unable to explain exactly what that meant, he had to borrow Manuela's hand, which was somewhat of a pain in the neck, but... Well, even so, that frivolous clerk prepared an outfit that completely matched Zagan's expectations. The dress this time around was a splendid finish that just made him want to sigh.

At times like this, I just want to be alone with her...

That line of thinking was rather unreasonable at a sorcerer's evening ball, but Zagan loved Nephy so much that he just could not help it. In order to distract himself from such thoughts, Zagan looked over to Chastille.

"For the time being, there likely aren't any idiots who would dare provoke my animosity. As long as you act carefully, it should be safe. Do as you please from here," Zagan said, implying she should be tactful. Chastille combed back her bangs and glared back at him.

"Let me ask you in return: do you really think that's enough in this situation?" Chastille spoke with resolution... or far from it, with tears filling her eyes, and Zagan was unable to stop sighing.

If you're self-aware, then shouldn't you try fixing it? It was far better than making major blunders while being unaware of it, but...

As Zagan put his palm to his face, Nephy gripped Chastille's hand and held it up at her chest.

"Shall we talk here some more until you've calmed down a little?"

He wanted to be all alone with Nephy, but if she was saying that, then there was nothing to be done. In any case, seeing that he would end up driving Chastille away at the current rate, Zagan ended up becoming concerned and was no longer able to feel relaxed. Chastille then tightly grasped Nephy's hand as if overcome with emotion.

"Oh, thank you. Nephy, you're always so kind."

"...Horse Head, aren't you embarrassed of being such a useless crybaby all the time?"

"Sure, but this isn't something that can be fixed that easily!"

Foll looked toward her with a gaze filled with contempt, and Chastille finally broke down into tears. And as one would expect, having found this pitiful, Nephy reprimanded Foll for it.

"Foll, you can't say such mean things. It looks like Chastille doesn't have much room for composure right now, so you should be kind to her."

"Is Horse Head ever actually composed?"

"I do not know, but right now it seems more serious than usual."

"...Nephy, I appreciate the thought, but it really feels like you're kicking me when I'm down here."

Well, I guess that's just Foll's own way of saying, 'If you don't shape up, then you won't be able to protect yourself.'

Fundamentally, both Nephy and Foll were poor talkers and weren't good at expressing their emotions. A stray bullet of such a level was surely just trivial. This was more or less conveyed to Chastille, as well. After wiping off her face, she finally stood back up.

"Going as far as making a small child worry about me is far too pitiful. I'm... alright now."

The tip of her nose was still red, but as Chastille smiled, Foll shook her head as if it was nothing.

"All I did was provide some advice befitting your elder. Don't worry about it."

"Advice, you say... No, now that you mention it, how old are you? You don't look any older than ten to me..."

Dragons were a legendary race which were said to live for eternity. Their growth was proportionally slow to that lifespan, so Foll, who was still young as a dragon, would have lived a considerable amount of time already.

Well, converting it to human age, she's likely just about ten years old. Zagan had convinced himself in that manner. And after that, Foll glared back fixedly at Chastille.

"Do you not know the saying that it's impolite to ask a lady her age? Horse Head."

"I think it's a sound argument, but the one who started talking about it was you, wasn't it?"

After thinking she was finally back on her feet, that girl broke down once more. And with her eyes already beginning to blur up with tears, Zagan threw her a question.

"Now that I think of it, where are the three idiots who are always around you?"

Chastille always had the Three Idiots of the Azure Sky... or rather, the Three Knights of the Azure Sky, accompanying her at all times. They seemed pretty dumb, but as Angelic Knights, they had a certain level of strength and held sufficiently high positions. Upon hearing his question, Chastille nodded in a somehow unpleasant way.

"I left them at the Suflaghida harbor."

"Ah, you can't have that lot causing trouble with sorcerers, after all."

"No, that's not why..." Chastille started twiddling both her index fingers together, then turned bright red and hung her head down.

"If they were here, then I wouldn't be able to talk with you properly, right?"

Zagan knit his brows. *What does this girl mean by that...?*

It was true that they wouldn't be able to have any worthwhile

talks if the three idiots were present, but after spending time with Nephly and Foll, Zagan felt like he had grown better at understanding the subtleties of emotions in others.

Somehow or other, it felt to him that she didn't mean it in the sense of business or friendly talks. It wasn't like Zagan himself didn't think anything of her, but if pushed to say it, it was something close to the desire to protect he had for Foll.

Regardless, Chastille was far too awkward, to the point where it felt like if somebody didn't save her, then she would suddenly fall over and die right in front of his eyes.

It had been said that Chastille was quite popular with the people despite being from the church, but he began to suspect whether it came from these feelings of being unable to leave her alone that he was feeling. At any rate, his feelings were something different from love.

Well, whatever. As long as it didn't get in the way of Zagan and Nephly, it didn't really matter what she felt. Chastille herself was surely not foolish enough to be unable to discern that as well.

...Moreover, she may have been planning on hiding this fact herself. Anyway, even if he received affection from a woman other than Nephly, he wouldn't know what to say or do, so it was best to just leave them shelved. And while pretending that he didn't realize anything, Zagan continued the conversation.

"So, is the leadership of that Unification Faction or whatever going well?" Zagan cut over to that point, which made Chastille stare back at him in wonder.

"How unexpected. I never thought you would be concerned about such things."

"Is that so?"

"How do I put it... You don't really care one single bit about the church, right?"

Zagan then returned a nod with a 'yeah.'

"If I see someone collapse after being poisoned, then I'll show a little sympathy."

"Huh, y-you... were... worried about me...?"

As he replied in a kind tone, Chastille's face was dyed red all the way to her ears.

Huh? Did I mess that up? Even though Zagan didn't have any intent to lead her on, it would be pitiful to give her a weird misunderstanding. Even at the best of times, this girl was somehow just too pitiful. And while Zagan was panicking on the inside, Chastille cleared out her throat with a cough and straightened out her back.

"I'm thankful that you're worried about me, but there haven't been any problems... That is to say, it's not like they've been making

me do anything. A month has passed since then, and there haven't really been any movements."

"Is that how it is?" Zagan stared back in wonder at the unexpected reply. Raphael then spoke in her stead.

"Is it not obvious? The goal of the Unification Faction is to avoid any unnecessary conflict with the damn sorcerers. What you seek is to demonstrate a unified relationship with sorcerers, which makes you perfect as you are now."

In other words, it seemed it was fine as long as she just got along with Zagan.

When I first heard about it, it seemed far more important than that, though... However, the one to tell him about it was Raphael. He was a man whose awkwardness led to misunderstandings and prejudice as he walked. If Barbatos were here, he would likely disagreeably say, 'You're one to talk!' if Zagan were to mention such a thing, but it may not have been all that off base.

Chastille then made a complicated expression, like she wasn't fully convinced.

"But we don't know when the demons will be revived, right? Then, isn't the task of building friendly relations between the church and sorcerers urgent business?"

"That is something which will be resolved if my liege's power grows."

Although he stepped down from his seat as an Archangel, it wasn't like Raphael was putting on airs in his retirement.

That's probably why he went out of his way to become my butler.

Because helping Zagan build up his authority was connected to accomplishing Wise Dragon Orobas' will, he obeyed Zagan. Zagan understood this, but he still let out a snort with a 'hmph.'

"You're talking an awful lot about your goals, but if anyone gets in my way, be they an Archangel or a sorcerer or whatever, I have no intention of going easy on them."

He liked her enough to consider her a friend, but Chastille's existence was not absolute on his priority list. As long as Chastille was a servant of the church and an Angelic Knight, she would become an enemy dependent upon the church's orders. And the change in their stated goals was directly connected to any danger that Nephy or Foll were exposed to. If need be, Zagan would cut anybody he deemed necessary loose.

Well, if she becomes an enemy, Nephy would be sad, so I'll do my best to handle it carefully, at least...

And after Zagan clearly informed them of that, Raphael let out a laugh.

"That is what makes you my liege. If you were not like that, the

other sorcerers would never follow.”

And this shrewd butler appeared to be obeying Zagan, on top of completely understanding his personality. His speech and conduct were certainly awkward, but he was a man who could conduct himself as if he had foreseen everything from time to time.

Zagan then shrugged his shoulders as he replied.

“Well, no matter what you think, as long as you don’t get in my way, I don’t mind.”

“I have already promised my sword to you. I have not rotted so far that I would go against my vow as a knight.”

Well, his loyalty to Zagan likely wasn’t a lie.

If not for that, there would be no way Foll would get attached to him too. She had surely gotten bored of such troublesome talks. Foll climbed up on Raphael and willfully rode on his shoulder as she nodded off... It certainly was the time for children to start getting sleepy. In any case, Foll once hated Raphael, as he was her target for revenge. However, now she could receive him like family just as she was doing now, so it was fine to believe him.

Chastille then struck her chest and nodded.

“Zagan, you have things that you must do, right? I don’t intend to be so weak as to hold you back, so... No, I may not be strong either, but, um... what I mean is...” For some reason, Chastille was muttering unintelligibly, but even so, she eventually took on a resolute attitude and continued, “I think... I want to become someone that you can rely on.”

Zagan was taken aback by her straightforward words, and Nephy also stared at her in wonder.

“I’ve already been saved by you many times now, so I want to pay back the favor. Whether you justify it as unification or cooperation, I want to be in that kind of relationship.”

“Rely on... huh?” Zagan made a sullen face as he ruminated on her words.

“I can’t say I really understand the concept of relying on others. I haven’t even even tried doing that.”

“Is that really so?”

“...What are you trying to say?” Zagan made a suspicious face as he questioned her, so Chastille turned her attention over to Nephy.

“Don’t you two already have full faith in each other? You might not realize it, but I think you’ve been relying on Nephy already.”

For some reason, Zagan was unable to deny those words.

“...You may be right.”

On that day, when Zagan first faced the Archdemons, he feared them and kept Nephy at a distance. He hurt her and left her on her own.

But even so, Nephy came back to me. At that time, he felt like he understood what ‘having your heart saved’ meant. There was also a real sense that he was being supported.

Surely, that was also the same as relying on someone. It wasn’t just Nephy. On top of researching the Sacred Swords and the Sigil of the Archdemon, Zagan clearly said himself that he expected much of Foll and Raphael.

With that, it was unreasonable to claim that he wasn’t relying on them. Well, if asked whether the day would come when Zagan would rely on Chastille like that, he could only tilt his head to the side. That was why Zagan let out a snort with a ‘hmpf.’

“Before making such a claim, reach the point where you’re able to look after yourself.”

“...Just what do you keep thinking I am?” Chastille said, then let out a sigh. Nevertheless, this time she didn’t burst into tears. And leaving her with a sidelong glance, Zagan shifted his attention to the other side of the table.

“So, the guy who’s been sneaking about over there for a while. You need something?”

There was a sorcerer who had been looking at Zagan the entire time in the shadows leading up to the bow of the boat.



“Eeek?”

As Zagan called them out, the sorcerer let out a scream and toppled over. From their looks, they appeared to be a boy of about twelve or thirteen years of age... No, or perhaps it was a girl? Their build was dainty like that of a girl, and their bones did not appear to stick out, but from the trousers and necktie they were wearing, it was a boy. At that age, it was also possible they were simply late in developing physically.

It’s the one who came to call us earlier, huh?

At that time, Zagan was concerned with Nephy, so he didn’t really pay any attention, but was this one of Bifrons’ subordinates?

As the sorcerer, who was a boy or a girl or whatever, got up in a fluster, they rubbed their hands together and formed a forced smile.

“G-Good evening, nice to meet you. I am called Nero. I-I wanted to greet the new Archdemon, and have hastened to appear before you.”

Zagan threw a glance over Nero, looking them over from the tips of their toes to the top of their head. Nero had golden hair and green eyes. Their facial features were well in order, but it strangely looked like that of both a boy and a girl. And yet, Zagan couldn’t sense anything like mana from them at all.

Just what is this...?

The mana he could sense from Nero was that of an ordinary person unrelated to sorcery. It was about right to say Nero was on the level of a sorcerer candidate. They were not one who was on the level of those invited to an Archdemon's evening ball. In fact, they were clearly an ordinary person. And exactly for that reason, Zagan's wariness grew stronger.

"How peculiar. Why is a bastard like you atop this boat?"

"Urgh, th-that's, um..." Nero mumbled as they glued both their hands and head against the deck.

"Sorry! Please forgive me. As you can see, I'm a novice sorcerer, but I don't have any talent, so I can't use it even after trying hard for a whole year! That's why I would like the esteemed Archdemon to perhaps take me as a disciple!"

An evening ball was a place where sorcerers made deals. After Zagan so boldly established his existence on the boat, it was inevitable that sorcerers would show up trying to make contact with him.

Chastille then knit her brows.

"In other words, you're a stowaway? I'm not really one to talk, but that's quite reckless..."

"I-I understand that it is rash of me, but this is all I can do anymore!"

Zagan sharply narrowed his eyes. *I see. I get it now.* And coming to an understanding, he nodded.

"Unfortunately, I don't have the time to take on a disciple."

Zagan taught Nephy sorcery because he wanted her to have a means to protect herself. Other than that, even Foll was learning on her own while reading through all the books in the castle. As he informed Nero of such in an overbearing tone, Nero clung to him, as if saying they would go as far as licking Zagan's boots.

"P-Please, somehow, do something! I will carry your luggage or make your meals or do anything you want! I-If you so desire, I will even lick your boots!"

...He didn't really think Nero would say anything about licking boots.

Looking at Nero, who seemed on the verge of crying and wailing any minute, Nephy let out a voice like she pitied them.

"Um, Master Zagan. Would it not be fine to at least listen to what they have to say just a little?"

"There's no need. This guy's—"

Zagan heard a voice call out from behind him, interrupting what he was about to say.

"Keeheehhe, it would be better for you not to trust a sorcerer, you know? Sorcerers are all liars, after all."

Before they knew it, a single sorcerer appeared behind Zagan, standing at very tip of the ship's bow.

Wow... Getting this close without me noticing is impressive... Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. And with that figure before their eyes, Nero fell backward.

"E-Eeek?"

Standing at the tip of the bow was an old woman gripping a large scythe in her hand. She wore a mantle which resembled an old rag from the head down, and her rough and bony fingers had several rings on them with large gems set inside. Her arms and legs were withered like a dead tree, and her back was curved over. And yet, the scythe she was gripping in her hand was about twice the size of her body. And from her head, she had twisting horns like that of a goat sprouting out.

A fomorian, huh? How rare.

They were a race that were said to inherit the blood of demons, and nowadays a rather rare species who were scarce in number, much like the elves. They were also famous for their high level of mana, which matched their supposed connection to demons.

"You're... Enchantress Gremory, correct?"

When she was young, she may have had an appearance befitting an enchantress, but... An old woman of a hundred years... Since she was a sorcerer, she likely lived multiple times as long. Still, being nicknamed an enchantress was so cruel that even Zagan felt a little sympathy. Though, he felt like she was just a little bit younger the last time he laid eyes on her.

Now that I think of it, Barbatos didn't say anything about Gremory being an old woman, either... Back when he had just placed Foll at the castle, when Barbatos heard about an adopted daughter, Gremory's name had come up. She really was quite impudent to say 'liar' if that were the case. This appearance of an old woman didn't seem to be her actual figure. It was likely the same system of sorcery that Foll used to take on the form of a human. And while still shouldering her scythe, the old woman reverently bent down at the waist.

"Keehee, to be recognized by an Archdemon is extremely delightful. My name is Gremory. I thought to give my greetings to the new Archdemon, you see?"

"I don't need your shameless flattery."

"Keeheehee, to throw aside rank like that is quite awe-inspiring."

The old woman showed her yellowing teeth as she laughed and raised her voice. However, though the old woman was facing Zagan, her consciousness was focused on the young girl riding on Raphael's shoulder. It was a gaze that showed she had discovered some sort of treasure.

“...Do you have some business with my daughter?”

To sorcerers, the race known as dragons was an extraordinarily valuable existence right down to the last drop of blood and scale. Even if she was before an Archdemon, it was possible for her to try and trick them.

As Zagan raised his voice with a severe intent to kill her if she laid her hands on Foll, the old woman's shoulders shook as she laughed with a 'kukuku.'

“It's nothing, I was just wondering if the beautiful butterflies the Archdemon surrounds himself with were kidnapped or not. It was just a concern. Seems it was but needless meddling though, wasn't it?”

Muttering that, the one Gremory made a glancing glare at was Nero. The fact that Nero was prostrating and crying as a move to buy sympathy was something that Zagan at least knew. That was why Zagan wanted to drive them away immediately. Giving the trembling and clattering Nero a sidelong glance, Zagan muttered in a tiresome manner.

“If you're going to show concern, then give it to her.”

“Eeek, are you selling me out, Zagan?!”

Moving the point of the conversation over to Chastille, she jumped up and let out a scream. Chastille was already cowering with the creepy old woman right before her eyes. However, Gremory wrinkled up her nose as if she disliked her.

“I hate Angelic Knights. Like I care if she dies or lives or is kept around.”

And that left Chastille at a loss for words. The sense of deep affection she pointed toward Nephy and Foll had flown off somewhere, and was replaced with blunt hostility.

If Bifrons didn't summon Chastille here, none of this bothersome crap would have happened... Seemed Zagan had one more reason to give a good slugging to that Archdemon. And while he was troubled over that fact, a shadow loomed over the old woman.

“Miss Gremory, it's impolite of you to say such mean-spirited things.”

It was a young voice, like that of a boy... but as Zagan looked up at the owner of that voice, he was left speechless. What was standing there was a large man with the manly mane of a lion.

This guy's... Black Blade Kimaris, I believe?

As a therianthrope, he didn't have the face of a human, but one of a beast with jet black fur wrapped around it. The golden glint in his eyes had a sharpness to them that seemed terrifying enough to make the king of beasts turn tail and run.

He was a giant that equaled Raphael in size, and Zagan could make out his well-forged body even under his robe. And that giant

was skillfully standing atop the railing at the bow of the boat.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Archdemon Zagan. I am called Kimaris. As you can see, I am a leonin sorcerer," Kimaris courteously extended his greeting, then picked up the old woman by the nape of her neck with his thick claws.

"I'm sorry, Sir Zagan. This person has a foul mouth, but in truth, she's a good person. Upon seeing all these children from rare races like the dragons and elves, she worried that they might have gone through something terrible. Please forgive her."

"L-Let me go, Kimaris! I have done nothing that deserves an apology!"

The manly lion bowed down repeatedly and advocated for the old woman.

"Ah, so are you two acquaintances?" Zagan muttered, somewhat taken aback.

"Yes. Though I may appear rather ferocious, I am quite the coward, so I have been relying on Miss Gremory for quite some time."

"Is that so..."

Somehow, whether it was because of the impact of his outer appearance or the look of his build, it felt like Zagan was looking at a fainthearted Raphael. *If you stuck this guy and Raphael into one person, then you would get a decent... No, you wouldn't, huh?*

That would only produce an inexplicable creature who was a giant with cowardly behavior, an evil countenance, and an inability to say anything but overbearing things.

Zagan glanced over to the old woman, and she was brandishing her scythe as she struggled and acted out violently.

"I simply love animals! Who would help one such as you because they like it?!"

"Miss Gremory, if you say things like love in this situation, even I will feel awkward."

While gazing at the peculiar combination of an old woman and a beast, Zagan felt like steeling himself before them was completely ludicrous.



If these guys were to become Archdemons, then wouldn't the world become more peaceful? Even if Zagan didn't scheme one thing or another, he felt like those two would protect Nephy and Foll. Chastille then opened her mouth to speak, as if she also found it to be a let down.

"How do I put it... Even among the sorcerers, there are guys who give off a good vibe, huh?"

"Thank you very much. But, if you were to try and harm the other sorcerers here, Miss Angelic Knight, I will also stake my life on fighting you."

"Eeek, why just me?!"

Seeing the golden glint in the lion's eye light up with bloodthirst, Chastille once more let out a scream.

Well, Angelic Knights are the natural enemies of sorcerers, after all.

And, as if he had no other choice, Zagan began explaining to mediate between them.

"Gremory, Kimaris, just as you have realized, this girl is an Angelic Knight of the church, Chastille. One of the Archangels... Well, she's a Sacred Sword wielder."

And as he introduced her as such, the two of them showed blunt hostility toward Chastille. However, Zagan simply continued in an indifferent manner.

"From her appearance, she looks like a crybaby, but it seems she wants to cooperate with sorcerers."

"...I feel like the way you said that just made things worse, honestly." Chastille let out a dissatisfied voice, and Gremory and Kimaris made faces like they were looking at a shady swindler.

"Are you saying she is abandoning the church and carrying favor with sorcerers?" Gremory responded.

"As one would expect, even I find that a bit too convenient a story," Kimaris followed up after her.

The two of them returned words of denial as if it were only natural, but Zagan slanted over his glass and spoke as if it was no big deal.

"That is inconsequential. If a Sacred Sword wielder obeys me, then I won't be troubled. If she does anything like betray me, I can just twist off her head and cast her aside."

"Th-There's no way I would betray you or anything, right?!"

Having had her spine completely removed, Chastille had no dignity left.

Well, I guess she does have the power to at least bisect the two standing in front of her... Gremory and Kimaris were both sorcerers who had their names entered as Archdemon candidates, but if

Chastille seriously swung her Sacred Sword, even without her Anointed Armor, they likely couldn't even put up a fight. After gazing at her for a while, Kimaris sharply narrowed his golden eyes and spoke in a gentle voice.

"I am also worried about Miss Angelic Knight over there, but please do be careful, Sir Zagan. You seem to be kind, so I do think there will be people out there who try to take advantage of that."

And the one Kimaris was glaring at while saying that was once again Nero. Nero turned so pale and was trembling so violently that it felt like they would soil themselves at any moment. However, Zagan knit his brows.

"Kindness, is it? I do believe that is a word unrelated to sorcerers, let alone Archdemons, though."

"The heart to feel affection for another is what people describe as 'kindness.' Sir Zagan, that is the very same emotion that you point toward each of your followers, is it not?"

Having such straightforward words said to him, Zagan was unable to object.

What an embarrassing thing for him to say with such perfect honesty. Unable to keep his cool anymore, Zagan averted his gaze while scratching his cheek.

"Ah, um... Well, I appreciate your warning. I will do my best to be careful."

"Yes. Well then, we shall excuse ourselves here," Kimaris said, then lumbered off while still gripping the nape of Gremory's neck. Their figures somehow bore a close resemblance to a lonely old woman and her beloved dog.

Did that guy... maybe come here to protect Gremory?

The emotions he was pointing toward that old woman were similar to what Zagan felt for Nephy and Foll. Zagan felt like the reason Kimaris went out of his way to come over was because he was worried about Gremory's safety as she spoke sharply before an Archdemon.

Sorcerers are villains, but I guess maybe not everyone has a broken personality like me... If it were to show on the surface, they would be taken advantage of, so perhaps everyone was simply concealing that side of themselves secretly.

Zagan seriously contemplated that idea as he stood in silence.



After seeing off Kimaris and Gremory, Chastille's shoulders drooped down in a crestfallen manner.

"...I thought I'd prepared myself for all this abuse, but I really am being treated cruelly."

“It’s your fault for revealing that you’re an Angelic Knight for no reason.”

“I’m not the one who said the words ‘Angelic Knight,’ now am I?” Chastille glared at Raphael reproachfully as she said that, but all the giant did was shrug his shoulders in an unconcerned manner.

After that, Zagan shifted his focus over to Nero. Perhaps due to being completely overwhelmed by Kimaris, Nero was once more hiding by the staircase and peeking over at Zagan and the others. Though the other sorcerers were pointing their gazes over, they likely had their enthusiasm killed off by Gremory and Kimaris. It didn’t seem like anybody planned on going to talk to Zagan. And so, he pulled over a nearby chair and beckoned Nephy toward it.

“Now then, it seems all the hindrances have vanished. You may sit, Nephy.”

“What...? I am fine standing, though.”

“Then... should Chastille take this seat?”

“...I’ll sit.”

Puffing her cheeks out with a huff, Nephy sat down next to Zagan. At that point, Foll sleepily opened her eyes while still perched on Raphael’s shoulder, then looked over to the table near the cabin where there was a lineup of food.

“I’m hungry. Zagan, can I eat that?”

Zagan nodded, and Foll swiftly jumped to the deck and ran over. And then, Raphael stepped forth.

“Well then, I demand you allow me to act at my own discretion. It is a good opportunity to gauge the standards of these damn sorcerers.”

He was speaking in a dreadful and substantive voice which sounded more like an order than a request, but he was probably saying that he wanted to go judge the merits of all the sorcerers onboard or something like that.

“I’ll allow it. Do as you like.”

“My liege has given permission. You may come along, Chastille.”

“N-No, I-I’ll stay here just a little...!” Chastille hysterically raised her voice at the sudden invitation.

“You would do well to learn the technique of reading the damn atmosphere. If you were a little wiser, then you would surely not have exposed your life to danger here.”

He likely meant to say, ‘If you don’t read the atmosphere a bit more here, then Zagan will scold you.’ And Chastille made a sullen face in response.

“...It’s quite embarrassing to be lectured about that by you...”

Raphael was the one who killed nearly five hundred sorcerers because of his misleading speech and conduct. It wasn’t unreasonable at all that Chastille would complain. And so, while making an

extremely dissatisfied face, she left Zagan and Nephy's side in tears.

After everyone else around the table had left, their surroundings fell silent. It seemed that a single piece of music had just ended, and this was the few seconds of silence before the next piece would begin.

The sound of the waves from the evening lake softly rang out. Unlike the salty sea breeze from the ocean that stuck to one's skin, the wind blowing over the lake was smooth and pleasant. Looking up at the sky, the moon was peeking through a gap in the clouds.

It seemed there was a full moon out. A pale light illuminated the gloomy deck, and even without sorcery, it became possible to look out over the whole ship.

There was a crescent moon on the evening of the day I first met Nephy, wasn't there? Even now, Zagan clearly remembered the image of her stretching her hands out toward the thin moon. And thinking back upon that, Zagan called out to Nephy.

"Uh, um, Nephy."

"Yes?"

"Do you want to sit here?" Zagan asked, leaving himself at his wit's end.

What the hell am I saying?!

All he wanted to say was that he wanted to be a bit closer to her... Yet as Zagan struck his own lap, the tip of Nephy's ears reddened as if she was troubled by his suggestion.

"It's... embarrassing to do that here."

Though there was a pause in any sorcerers getting close to them for the moment, the fact didn't change that all their gazes were aimed at Zagan. And in a fluster, Zagan nodded.

"O-Oh. I know."

And as he tried to make a nonchalant face, Nephy once more puffed out her cheeks.

"Master Zagan, you've been a little mean lately."

"Well, that's because you've been showing me all sorts of new faces lately, Nephy."

Those were words straight from his heart. And upon receiving that surprise attack, Nephy turned bright red and cast her eyes down.

"...Master Zagan, that's unfair."

It didn't seem she was all that dissatisfied, but she still strangely couldn't accept it. The tips of her reddened ears began quivering with a twitch.

Now that I think of it, I wonder what Nephy's ears feel like right now... Last time, when he brushed his cheek against hers, they were quite hard. However, when she was relaxed, he felt like they seemed to be soft. Unable to hide his curiosity any longer, Zagan tried gently touching Nephy's ear.

“Hyaaa?” Nephy’s body trembled as she let out an adorable scream. As for the ear, it was even softer than he expected. And yet, it felt flushed and hot.

When she’s not shocked out of her mind, its unexpectedly tender, huh?

Last time she should have been far beyond just shocked out of her mind. Such tension may have had some relation to the hardness of her ears. And while Zagan was making such observations, Nephy eyes began darting about.

“Um, uh, Master Zagan?”

It had been quite a while since Zagan last heard Nephy make such a bewildered voice. He may not have heard it ever since she first opened her heart to him about mysticism. Due to that, Zagan came back to his senses instantly.

“Ah, um... Sorry. I was just curious, you see.”

“Curious about... my ears?” Nephy said, then curiously touched her own pointy ears. And in response, Zagan vigorously nodded.

In a sense, it’s Nephy’s cutest point, so why wouldn’t I be?!

When he wanted to know how Nephy was feeling, the first thing Zagan would look at were her ears. So, when he looked at the abundantly expressive reactions they had, it was only natural for her beauty to multiply. And perhaps those feelings came across, as Nephy looked up at Zagan fixedly with upturned eyes.

“...If it pleases you, then by all means.” Nephy proclaimed, then brought her face closer to him, defenselessly presenting her ears.

Is this really okay? Sure, Zagan was the one who voiced his thoughts on the matter, but he never thought she would say that it was alright to touch them. After taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Zagan resolutely faced Nephy once more.

“Th-Then, I’m touching them, alright?”

“Yes.”

Ever so timidly, Zagan tried touching both of Nephy’s ears as if he were wrapping them up from below. And those ears, which were dyed a feverish red, felt much hotter than before. He then ascertained the tender sensation within his fingers.

I can’t feel anything like a pulse, so there aren’t any arteries there, right?

Nephy’s fully flushed face and the way she was pinning down her chest made it clear as day that her heart was beating like a hammer, but her pulse wasn’t being transmitted all the way to her ears. And as Zagan then inquisitively tried stimulating them, the ears in his hand quivered with a twitch.

Her tender ears then gradually became harder. He could tell that Nephy’s tension was accumulating within her.

“Haaah... Haaa...”

A gasp spilled out of Nephy's lips. Was this perhaps because it was ticklish? Nephy bit down on her own finger and tightly closed her eyes, intending to endure it, but that only made her needlessly more bewitching.

What's this? It feels like I'm doing something extremely lewd right now... Nevertheless, Zagan wanted to see more of such reactions from Nephy and slid his fingers from the base of her ears right to their pointy tips.

"Hyaaafuuu?" Nephy's eyes shot open, and her body arched back. Seeing tears welling up in her eyes, Zagan let his hands go in a panic.

"S-Sorry. Did that hurt?"

And while he was all shook up, Nephy shook her head.

"No, it's alright. Um, it's just... the first time I've been touched in such a place, so..."

"I-I see..."

It seemed that Nephy was bewildered by a first-time sensation.

Thinking about it carefully, ears are sensitive even for humans, right? Zagan would have refused right away if someone asked to touch his. And thinking of how Nephy let him touch such a precious portion of her body, somehow, he started to feel kind of weird. Unable to look directly into each other's eyes, the two of them averted their faces.

"Huh?" And then, both of them finally noticed that their little exchange was being watched by everyone on the deck. The musical group's siren had forgotten to even sing and had her mouth agape. Chastille was trying to get some food and had her empty fork loitering around in the air. Raphael was using his large body to block Foll's line of sight. Foll was stomping about violently as if incredibly discontent. And Kimaris and Gremory averted their gazes as if they were somehow no longer able to watch their display.

Zagan and Nephy then separated from each other with extreme vigor. And while rapidly fanning her face with her hand, Nephy muttered something in a low whisper.

"...Next time, um, please leave it... for when we are alone..."

Rather than saying it was alright to touch them again, Zagan understood her words to mean that she wanted him to do so again.

"Fuwah?"

As Zagan reflexively turned back around, Nephy had her face turned away and was covering her ears, but what he could see of them through the gaps between her fingers were dyed bright red.

So, she didn't really hate it or anything...?

However, would Zagan really be able to maintain his usual composure after witnessing such a reaction? It seemed she wasn't all that dissatisfied at having her ears touched, but having said that, whether she would accept any further acts was a different matter.

...Wait, I haven't said 'I love you' to her at all so far, have I?

As one would expect, the order of events was quite backward. And while Zagan was worrying endlessly about his mistakes, Nero rubbed their hands together, drawing closer to him all the while.

"Eheh, eheheh, Lord Zagan and Lady Nephy sure have a harmonious relationship, I see. Ah, your glass is empty, you know? Shall I fill it back up for you?"

It appeared that Nero had yet to give up. After grabbing a bottle of wine from the table, Nero began willfully filling Zagan's glass.

However, Zagan simply made a clearly discontent face in response.

"I don't need it. Get lost already."

"C-Come on. All I wanted was to provide you two some service. Yes, you can just simply think of me as a scarecrow or something!"

...How shameless. Should I just slug this guy?

However, after going to the trouble of creating a peaceful mood with Nephy, he didn't want to do something so boorish. And while Zagan groaned over that, Nephy timidly turned her head back around.

She looked over to Nero just for a moment, and perhaps thinking it was pitiful to just drive them away, resolutely opened her mouth to speak.

"Um, Master Zagan. There is something... that I would like to talk with you about."

Just from hearing that, Zagan could immediately tell that it was about what happened in Kianoides the other day. She kept quiet and didn't even speak of it to Zagan, but it seemed that she finally felt like opening up.

"Go on. Let me hear it."

After he nodded back to her, Nephy let out a sigh like she was somehow relieved. And then, she made a determined expression as she began speaking.

"Master Zagan, it's about what happened the other day. When I went to Kianoides with Foll, we were attacked by a certain person."

"...One of Bifrons' subordinates?"

"I don't... really know. But, I believe they may be a little different from a sorcerer."

"It wasn't a sorcerer?"

However, from the way Nephy phrased it, it didn't appear to be the work of an Angelic Knight, either.

And just as he awaited her next words...

"Huh...? The hell is this? Fog?"

A white mist rushed past Zagan's feet and shrouded the area. And as it repelled the bright moonlight, its movements even resembled that of a massive beast. The fog swelled up in a flash, and everything

beyond Zagan's breath had been completely dyed white before his eyes.

Before Zagan could listen to everything Nephy had to say, a mysterious event had suddenly begun.

Chapter III: Naturally, Any Archdemon Will Have a Horrendous Personality

Nephy thought she had lost consciousness at first, as a wave of dizziness washed over her and her vision turned white. Still, she immediately realized she was mistaken. Zagan's voice rang out as he called for her within that pure white fog.

"Nephy! Where are you?!"

The fog suddenly enveloped her, and in no time at all, it concealed the entirety of the evening ball's luxurious passenger boat. Even the table right before her eyes had vanished, and Nephy was unable to see Zagan's seat when it should have been right next to her. The sorcerers atop the ship all raised their voices in agitation, seemingly suffering from the same fate as her.

I'm over here, Master Zagan! Nephy tried to call out to him, but soon realized that her voice wasn't coming out. No, it wasn't just her voice. For some reason, she couldn't even move a single finger.

It wasn't like she'd collapsed from fatigue, as she could clearly feel that she was seated in a chair, but it appeared that Zagan was also unable to perceive her figure.

Is this an attack on the ship... using sorcery? That seemed unlikely, as there was no sorcery that could befuddle Zagan to such an extent. After all, he was the Archdemon known as Sorcerer Slayer. If this fog was sorcery he was unable to erase, then only another Archdemon could have cast it. And if not that...

Could it be... the person who had the same face as me? Dark Nephy manipulated power similar to mysticism, so that was a distinct possibility. As that thought passed her mind, a sense of dread ran through her body.

If it's that person's power, then even Master Zagan will be unable to defend against it!

The sole opponent that Zagan, who held the second name Sorcerer Slayer, was not well suited to face was someone who drew their power from something other than sorcery. Mysticism even surpassed objects like Sacred Swords and could wound Zagan. And so, Nephy tried to convey the impending danger to him, but her body was fixed in the chair and wouldn't budge an inch.

I should have opened up to him about it sooner! Nephy finally managed to put her feelings in order after Manuela chastised her, yet she still missed her opportunity to reveal the truth to him. And as she was writhing over that, somebody right next to her moved.

“Lady Nephy, are you alright?”

It was Nero. For some reason, they were able to move, and while groping around, managed to arrive next to Nephy’s chair.

No, wait, am I the only one being restrained, I wonder?

If that were the case, this was an attack against Nephy herself. And just then, the fog suddenly dispersed and her vision returned. Nero’s face was right before her eyes, but was not looking at her. And then, as if unable to believe it, Nero looked back over to Nephy.

“Huh...? There’s... two Lady Nephys?”

A girl with the same face as Nephy had collapsed right in front of Zagan. However, it wasn’t only her face, even the color of her skin and eyes and the dress she was wearing were all the same. Dark Nephy should have had dark skin and golden eyes, but this new girl didn’t.

Can it be the same person as that time...? Nephy couldn’t understand her intentions on the spur of the moment. Nero was also making a confused face while looking at Nephy and the other ‘Nephy’ alternately.

“A puppet... That can’t be the case, right? Huh? What’s going on here?”

Nephy was somehow able to move her gaze, so it seemed the fact that she wasn’t a puppet was conveyed to Nero, as well. However, in the next instant, Nephy went completely pale at the action Zagan took.

“Are you alright, Nephy...?” Zagan called out to the collapsed girl using that name. And ‘Nephy’ faintly opened her eyes and raised a sweet voice.

“Master Zagan...? Wh-What is...?”

“Who knows? I don’t think it’s a natural phenomenon, but it also doesn’t seem to be sorcery.”

And dumbfounded by that scene, Nero spoke in a bewildered voice.

“Lord Zagan, Lady Nephy is also... Huh, what? I can’t move forward.” Nero called out to Zagan, but the hand that Nero stretched out was forced back, as if being obstructed by something. It also seemed that their voice wasn’t reaching Zagan.

Which means... Master Zagan can’t see us over here? Nephy grew more and more pale upon realizing that fact. And perhaps seeing that, Nero rushed over to her in a fluster.

“It’s alright, Lady Nephy! Though inadequate, this Nero will be

of assistance to you!” Nero encouraged her in a voice that couldn’t really be pinned down as either a young boy or girl’s, but in the end, Nephy was unable to respond to them. As ‘Nephy’ stood up while wobbling, she embraced Zagan’s arm.

“Master Zagan, I’m... scared.”

Her eyes were looking over at Nephy and appeared to be laughing at her, which convinced Nephy of who this was.

Like I thought, this person... is the same one who attacked me!

It was Dark Nephy, and this whole situation was her doing. And if that were the case, what exactly was her goal? Embracing Zagan in that way... was something that Nephy herself had only done a few times before. However, it wasn’t the time or place to be embracing like that. And in an unusual turn, Zagan coldly tore his arm away from her.

“Stay back. Seems we’re under some sort of attack.”

It seemed he didn’t want ‘Nephy’ to get caught in any attacks aimed at him. And seeing the amount of care he was showing her was enough to drive Nephy mad.

Nero then muttered to her in a bewildered tone.

“It looks like Lord Zagan believes the Lady Nephy over there is the real one. I doubt Lord Zagan would mistake her for someone else, soooo, is the Lady Nephy over here maybe a fake? Or perhaps, Lady Nephy has a twin or something?”

As Nero arbitrarily made a list of possibilities, Nephy felt like her heart was being gouged out.

Master Zagan! That’s not me! Nephy desperately thought. However, even if she wanted him to realize that, Nephy was unable to speak or even move a single finger. Though, it seemed that her tears could flow, as they ran down her cheeks out of frustration. Dark Nephy then turned a faint smile toward Nephy as that happened. And then, she once more entrusted her body to Zagan’s chest.

“Master Zagan. I’m cold... and scared. Could you... please comfort me?”

After that, she closed her eyes and tried to press her lips against Zagan’s.

Stop! I don’t want to see this! Nephy wanted to avert her gaze, but she was being restrained and couldn’t even blink. Feelings of disgust and anger were rampaging around in her chest. Thinking of how Zagan’s lips would be sullied by that woman, she burst into tears from fear. And as Dark Nephy coaxed him for a kiss, Zagan...

“The hell’s with you? You’re being too damn familiar for having just met me.”

“Fugyuuu?”

Well, he simply quashed Dark Nephy’s cheeks together with one

hand, and spoke in an exasperated tone.





What's with this girl?

Since there was a girl who looked a lot like Nephy within the fog, he ended up helping her, but she suddenly drew in for a kiss. Zagan couldn't understand the meaning of that at all.

The girl who resembled Nephy wriggled and struggled out of Zagan's hand and made some space between them, her face appearing like a writhing octopus all the while. Her figure then gradually changed from a dress to a sorcerer's robe, and her pure white skin also darkened. After that, her eyes turned golden, but her face remained the spitting image of Nephy's. It seems that just her face was actually her own. The girl who resembled Nephy then groaned in a voice like she couldn't believe it.

"H-How did you know?"

"Huh...? What are you talking about?"

He thought she was just some weirdo who liked to get all touchy, but it didn't look like there was any sign she was getting ready to launch an attack, either.

When Zagan rose to the deck, he put on quite the show, so he assumed she was just trying to gain his favor like Nero, but it seemed that wasn't the case. After tilting his head and agonizing over the situation for a while, he let out an 'ah' before speaking.

"...I really don't think this makes much sense, but were you trying to impersonate Nephy?"

And once Zagan realized that was the case, anger suddenly welled up within him.

That damn Bifrons! Are you making fun of me? Zagan thought that Bifrons would try to start something, but he didn't think it would come down to a tasteless attempt at getting on his nerves.

"Ridiculous... Are you saying that you weren't deceived at all?"

It appeared that she was seriously intent on tricking Zagan. As such, Zagan yelled back at her with a vein popping on his brow.

"Are you screwing with me? If you're going to pretend to be Nephy, then put a little effort into copying her! Nothing but your face even resembles her, so it's impossible not to notice!"

"No... way... You... noticed...?"

The girl who resembled Nephy fell to her knees, as if completely beaten down. Looking at it objectively, her disguise was perfect. Everything, from the stiffness of Nephy's expression to the tone of her voice, and even her attire and gestures were perfectly imitated. If it were someone that Nephy was only somewhat close to, for example, someone like Raphael, then they would have fallen for it. By no means

was it such a poor job that it deserved disparagement.

However, this was Zagan, who had been continuously observing Nephy since they met over two months ago. How she showed happiness, how she showed sadness, how she showed that she was enjoying herself, and how she showed anger... He knew all of them down to the finest details. In the face of that, this girl was nothing but a buffoon. And as her confidence shattered, it didn't seem the pitiful girl would regain her composure anytime soon.

After that, Zagan shifted his focus behind himself.

"You there, who's been sneaking about for a while, it's about time you show yourself."

Zagan swung his fist into empty air as he said that. However, he felt a dull sensation, and then a fissure ran through the foggy world.

I thought there would be a guy around here using sorcery.

It was truly ingenious sorcery. The caster had concealed it by slipping it in with the unidentifiable fog, but it was certainly sorcery. And because it was, there was no reason Zagan couldn't deconstruct it...

Moments after Zagan swung his fist, the pure white world shattered to pieces. What appeared before him was the table that he and Nephy were seated at previously. Nephy was still seated in a completely dumbfounded state, and next to her, Nero was sitting on the ground, having fallen back.

"So it's you..." Zagan clenched his fist, several magic circles coiling around his arms as he said those words. It was the portion of power that he had eaten from the sorcery he'd just destroyed. If it was average sorcery, then even after eating it, it could only be converted into just about a single circle. Even the sorcery that Barbatos seriously threw out would barely reach five or six. In other words, the caster of the sorcery he just smashed held power that was at least on par with Barbatos. And with Zagan's wrath looking down on them, Nero began trembling violently and turned completely pale.

"Eek, y-you're wrong! I was just... assisting Lady Nephy, so—" Nero screamed out, sounding just about ready to soil themselves, and violently shook their head to the sides as Zagan mercilessly swung down his fist.

"HYAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!" Nero shrieked.

Zagan's fist smashed the deck and made the bow of the boat itself cave in. The shock of that strike was tremendous, and in spite of the attack being at the bow, the stern of the ship was flipped up. The entire deck was inclined toward the bow, and the sturdy masts bent like a bow.

Zagan didn't even spare a glance to Nero's final moments as he gently embraced Nephy, who had still yet to move from her chair.

And just then, the stern that had jumped up slammed onto the surface of the water. The impact made the lake burst out, and the fog that was covering the boat was completely torn away. The lake water that was thrown in the air then came pouring down like rain. Naturally, the damage done to the boat was clear as day upon the fog's disappearance.

The tables covered in food and even the piano of the musical troupe were all tossed off the deck into the lake. It also appeared that the siren singer was thrown into the lake, though she was probably safer there. And as one would expect from those invited to an Archdemon's evening ball, at the very least, there wasn't a single idiotic sorcerer who tumbled into the lake.

However, it was difficult to stand atop the swaying deck of a ship that could sink at any moment. The only one able to stand upright was Raphael. He simply landed on the deck and stood stock-still with agility that seemed impossible for someone of his stature. Foll had sprouted dragon wings from her back and was floating in the air. As for the one who needed the most concern, in an unexpected turn, Chastille was being carried and protected by Foll.

"...Heavy."

"Gyaaa?!"

Foll immediately let go of her, though, and Chastille landed face first onto the deck. Zagan also slammed onto the deck as he landed, and as he did, Nephy trembled with a start within his arms. After that, having finally regained her senses, she took in a deep breath.

"Master... Zagan..."

"Are you alright, Nephy? Did they do anything to you?"

Although it was just for a few seconds, Zagan ended up losing sight of Nephy. Not only that, but Nero was there. He was seriously worried that she may have caught some strange germs. Nephy's lips trembled as if she was unable to speak, and unable to bear it anymore, she buried her face in Zagan's chest and squeezed onto him tightly. Her dainty shoulders were shaking as if she was scared, yet relieved at the same time.

This gracefulness... Yep, this is definitely Nephy... Zagan felt relieved as he gently brushed Nephy's head.

"I let you go through something frightening. Forgive me."

"You're wrong. Master Zagan, it's because... you could tell..." Nephy's ears quivered with a twitch. Rather than frightened, it seemed like she was overcome with emotion.

Is she relieved that I saved her, perhaps? Zagan embraced Nephy once more to give her peace of mind. And as he comforted the girl beloved to him, he heard a grating, groaning voice.

"L-Lord Zagan, save me..."

It was Nero. Zagan's strike ran past Nero and struck the deck. Having been spared from a direct hit, the self-proclaimed novice sorcerer was dangling from the broken deck of the ship. And in response to that pitiful voice, Zagan's face warped, showing his extremely evident exasperation.

"How long do you plan on continuing this farce... Bifrons?"



As Zagan said that, Nero stared back blankly at him. Nephry also didn't seem to understand the meaning of his words and was looking at both Zagan and Nero in turn.

"H-Huh...? What are you saying...?" Nero asked, shamelessly acting flustered. Zagan, however, simply clenched his fist once more in response. In the end, he wouldn't be satisfied until he bashed in Nero's face.

"Wait, Lord Zagan... you're kidding, right...?" Nero's face clearly displayed a sense of fear despite his insistence that the situation had to be a joke. Zagan, in turn, mercilessly swung his fist at it. However, this time, there was no feedback at all. The moment before Zagan's fist made contact, Nero's body crumbled away like sand.

Some sort of teleportation, then.

Nero didn't cross through shadows like Barbatos did. It was sorcery that switched the body's place with some other object's. It was said that among fomorians, there were those who could transform their bodies into mist, and this was a power that closely resembled that.

"...Dear me. Just as ever, you have no mercy at all, huh, Archdemon Zagan?"

As Zagan shifted his attention over to that voice, he spotted Nero's body floating above the bow of the ship that had completely fallen off.

"I was quite confident in my little play, too... Tell me, when exactly did you notice?"

"As if there'd be a 'novice sorcerer' that you can't sense any amount of mana from at an Archdemon's ball."

Yes. From the moment Zagan met Nero, he suspected him. And, as one would expect, Zagan was convinced that it was Bifrons after exchanging a few words with him.

Besides, Gremory seemed to have noticed this guy's identity, too... Zagan wasn't sure about Kimaris, but the warning Gremory gave him was obviously about Nero. That was why Zagan didn't drive away that old woman.

Nero then slapped their own forehead and laughed dryly.

"I see. I suppose that means I messed up the setting, then. I haven't shown up at many evening balls, so I was a tad careless... But,

if you noticed, then wouldn't it have been fine to play along just a little longer? Nephteros seems to be terribly hurt right now, you know?"

Nero shifted their attention to the end of the deck. Over there, the girl who resembled Nephy was still on her knees. And just then, the crick and crack of the wooden structure of the ship breaking apart resounded in the air. It appeared that Zagan's strike dealt fatal damage to the boat. The deck at their feet was greatly inclined, and even now, the ship was being dragged down to the bottom of the lake.

"Oops, seems the ship's about to sink because of you. With this, we can't even have a quiet conversation, huh?"

After finding something funny and letting out a stifled laugh, Nero snapped their fingers. At that, a magic circle spread out from Nero's feet, and the bow of the boat that was smashed to bits warped as if in a haze, reconstructing in the blink of an eye. The scene resembled a magnet gathering iron sand.

As Zagan took a fleeting glance behind him, he noticed that the tables, and even the piano that should have tumbled into the lake, were back in their original positions. Even the food was rearranged atop their plates, though it was doubtful that anyone would eat some, given the situation.

Zagan was fully capable of using sorcery that reconstructed broken objects, so he could tell Nero used something wholly different.

Same as the teleportation sorcery from before... Does Bifrons use that dust-like substance as a medium? Zagan sharply observed the other Archdemon, trying to figure out their secrets, as Raphael and the others came running over.

"An enemy, my liege?" Raphael tried to step forth while still wearing the armor and helmet of Valefor, but Zagan held him back with one hand. Next, Foll landed gently from the night sky, and then Chastille managed to catch up with her.

"Chastille, take care of Nephy," Zagan said, entrusting Nephy to someone who didn't even seem able to stand on her own as he advanced toward the reconstructed bow of the ship.

"With this, can we have a proper conversation, I wonder?" Nero spread out both their arms in a bombastic manner while asking that ludicrous question.

"I am Archdemon Bifrons. Welcome to my ship on this fine evening."

Bowing down in a theatrical manner, Nero... no, Archdemon Bifrons named themselves. Much like before, there wasn't a hint of the dignity of an Archdemon to be found in their behavior. Nevertheless, Zagan felt a sense of dread as he stared at them.

I don't sense anything at all from this guy...

Nothing could be felt, be it an air of intimidation, dread, or even just a sense of presence. It was to the point where Zagan doubted whether there was actually anyone in front of him, even though he could see them with his eyes. And after spreading out their arms, Bifrons beckoned over the elven girl who was squatting down in a corner of the deck.

“Come now, Nephteros, don’t just wallow in misery over there. You have to come and greet everyone, you know?”

It seemed Nephteros was the name of the girl who was the spitting image of Nephy. Nephteros bit down on her lips as if enduring humiliation, and while glaring at Nephy, she lined herself up next to Bifrons.

She’s a dark elf, huh? How rare.

The first thing that stood out about her were her pointy ears, which resembled Nephy’s. She was an elf. Her hair, which covered her back all the way down to her waist, was silver, and her strong-willed eyes were golden. However, the single point that differentiated her most from Nephy was her dark skin. Beneath her robe, Zagan caught a glimpse of her exposed cleavage, waist, and both her thighs, so it was an outfit that was troubling for him to look at.

And as the girl continued to glower without speaking, Bifrons shrugged their shoulders.

“Hahaha, sorry that she’s such an unsociable child. This girl is Nephteros. She’s my cute little doll.”

Zagan found it unpleasant that Bifrons was calling a girl with the same face as Nephy a doll, but he didn’t sympathize with her.

I see. This girl must be the one who hurt Nephy in Kianoides, then...
Zagan could tell from looking at her face. Being harmed by someone with the exact same face as you would be unsettling, and if it was something done maliciously, then it was sure to leave a mark on one’s mind.

Moreover, the girl called Nephteros seemed to hold a significant amount of hostility toward Nephy. No matter how much she resembled Nephy, Zagan’s compassion was not deep enough that he would show any benevolence to someone with hostile intentions. Above all else, there was a need to clearly demonstrate what would happen to those who dared lay their hands on those under his protection.

Zagan cracked his neck to the sides and beckoned Bifrons over.

“A doll’s actions are the responsibility of its owner. Let me show my thanks for playing with my disciple. I’ll sever your head clean from your neck, so step forward.”

“Hahaha, you’ve crushed Nephteros’ honor to such an extent already, so can we just call it even with that?”

“Huh...? How exactly are we even?”

It was certainly true that the one to directly harm Nephy was Nephteros, and he may have dealt a blow to her, but Zagan had yet to repay Bifrons. Zagan didn't care if Bifrons was an Archdemon or whatever. He was neither gentle nor composed enough to show forgiveness.

Zagan then gazed at Nephy's cheek. *Aren't there even traces of her crying?*

It was not a trivial matter that Nephy cried. Especially since Zagan himself had only seen her tears a single time before.

“You made Nephy cry. At this point, even your death wouldn't be sufficient.”

Bifrons likely realized that Zagan was being serious. And despite looking surprised, they squinted in delight.

“Hmm, I thought you were quite the brave child back when we first met, but it seems you've grown even more bold after becoming an Archdemon, huh?” Bifrons stated in a tone similar to a teacher praising a student who had done well. Then, Bifrons rolled up their left sleeve and stuck out that arm. And on the upper portion of said arm... was an ominously shining sigil.

“Still, having my first junior not pay any respect to me feels quite depressing... Shall I teach you a little lesson?”

Immediately following that declaration, a suffocating mana began bursting out of the small Archdemon.

“AAHAHAHAA! It's time to start the fun little sideshow!” Bifrons laughed loudly.

“Urgh...” Chastille was unable to endure it and fell to her knees. Raphael stepped forward as if to cover for her, but Zagan could tell that he was groaning beneath that armor. Even the dragon Foll had turned pale and fell on her butt. And it wasn't just Chastille and the sorcerers on the deck who were overwhelmed, either... Even Nephteros, who was next to Bifrons, was pinning down her chest with a pained expression on her face. After a while, upon gazing in satisfaction at the sight of the guests on the deck, Bifrons began speaking.

“Now then, there must be many here who are only witnessing this for the first time. This is the Sigil of the Archdemon. It is proof that we thirteen Archdemons are the absolute peak of sorcerers,” Bifrons said, showing off the sigil once more, then continued. “The next to become an Archdemon may very well be among you. That's why you should take a good look at this spectacle. A collision between fellow Archdemons is a grand event that doesn't even happen once every hundred years, after all.”

Even while Bifrons spoke such belligerent words, it was hard to

tell whether they seriously planned to fight because of their theatrical attitude. It even made Zagan suspect that, by some chance, perhaps they were just a sorcerer under the impression that they were Bifrons.

The Sigil of the Archdemon appeared to be the real deal, but it also wouldn't have been all that strange for a monster who'd lived for several hundred years to make one or two replicas.

Actually, what is the point of all this? Zagan didn't believe there was any point in a sorcerer engaging in combat. If Bifrons was targeting Zagan and Nephy's knowledge and power, there should have been a more intelligent way of going about it. Going out of their way to gather sorcerers with power and provoking them was an action that made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

It made no sense, but even so, Archdemons were peerless in strength. Bifrons looked at Zagan, seemingly ridiculing him all the while.

"Now then, can the Sorcerer Slayer consume even the power of the sigil, I wonder? Let's put that to the test, shall we?"

The principle that granted Zagan the second name Sorcerer Slayer involved using the same magic circle as his opponent. He stacked on the exact same circuits in an instant and hijacked his opponent's sorcery, rewriting it to be his own. Zagan's talent of accurately copying even a circuit he had seen for the first time was the very foundation of his power. And due to that, the more complicated the magic circle, the more difficult it would be to devour.

With mana backed by the Sigil of the Archdemon, just how complex of a circuit could be constructed? As his opponent was an Archdemon like him, Zagan was unsure whether he could truly take over his sorcery.

Despite being in an endlessly disadvantageous situation, Zagan's expression was utterly serene. Naturally, his stomach was boiling with anger over Nephy being hurt, but he didn't lose his composure all the same.

Eventually, Zagan lightly waved his right hand, as if knocking on an invisible door. With a clink, a sound like that of a tuning fork rang out. Mysteriously, that simple gesture made the vortex of mana that dominated the deck suddenly vanish.

"Huh...?" Bifrons let out an idiotic exclamation.

Sure, I've mostly been investigating Celestian, but it's not like I didn't research the Sigil of the Archdemon as well.

"The power of the sigil is certainly troublesome, but I have the same thing at hand. Did you really think I couldn't counter it?" Zagan said in an exasperated voice.

When Zagan met the twelve Archdemons, he saw it for the first time. *This Sigil of the Archdemon resonates with the twelve others.*

It truly was like a tuning fork. In other words, there was some sort of connection between the sigils. That was why Zagan was able to seal their power.

"Impossible. Just... what did you do?" Bifrons said in a shocked voice.

Seeing the small Archdemon lose their presence of mind, Zagan let out a 'hmm' as if he found this quite amusing.

So Bifrons has finally shown me what's on their mind. At the very least, it didn't seem like Bifrons was merely acting shaken. And so, Zagan held out his right hand and began to explain his handiwork.

"The Sigils of the Archdemon resonate with each other. All I did was use that to seal them."

"...Ugh, but if you did that, then your sigil shouldn't have gotten off scot-free."

Zagan nodded like there was no problem as Bifrons pointed out the obvious.

"That's right. So what?"

Just like Bifrons, the sigil on Zagan's right hand lost its shine. By sealing his own sigil, Zagan had doomed Bifrons' sigil to the same state. Putting it another way, the fact that both were sealed proved that Bifrons' Sigil of the Archdemon was the real deal.

Either way, it's something I never really used much in the first place... Zagan had only really used it two times in the past. Once was when he drove away the demon that Barbatos ended up summoning, and the other when he fought against Raphael. He tried to see what would happen if he let the sigil collide with a Sacred Sword, but the sigil was not damaged in the least. It was certainly power befitting the title of Archdemon, but in the end, Zagan only thought of it as borrowed power. *And in the end, you never know when you'll lose possession of something you've borrowed.*

However, it wasn't like Zagan feared such a dangerous sigil and kept his distance from it. He simply didn't rely on it because he didn't trust it. He also looked into all he could aside from just a method of destroying it.

In the first place, Zagan was investigating the Sigil of the Archdemon with the express purpose of killing all the other Archdemons. As long as they were as arrogant as Zagan hoped, he would surely face them at some point. He didn't know whether that would be tomorrow or hundreds of years in the future, but it just so happened that today was one such instance.

"Are you saying you cast aside your own power...?" Bifrons' eyes shot open, clearly bewildered by such a foolhardy action. And then, even though Bifrons had lived for several hundred years, they realized they were 'just a sorcerer' to Zagan due to the loss of the sigil.

“I see... I never even imagined such a method existed. How splendid,” Bifrons muttered with an expression of utter admiration as mana began flowing out of the sorcerer’s feet. Then, they said, “I will admit that fact, but I wonder if you can cover for our gap in experience.”

By the time Bifrons finished muttering, the sorcery of the Archdemon had been completed. It seemed that even while Bifrons was making a surprised expression, circuits were being secretly constructed. At this point, it was too late to defend against it or devour it. Or well, that was the plan, anyway.

“That’s quite the sophisticated sorcery. This is the first time I’ve met someone who can construct this many circuits with a single word. I should expect as much of a fellow Archdemon, I suppose.”

As the sound of Zagan tapping his heel rang out, the circuits Bifrons had constructed dispersed. Then, that power was devoured by Zagan and collected in his arm. Magic circles that doubled in number from when he absorbed the sorcery within the fog were now coiled about Zagan’s arm, and Bifrons’ eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“You took that many circuits... and devoured them at first sight...? I was sure that I wove nothing but circuits that you knew nothing about, too...”

“Yeah. It was quite illuminating...” Zagan nodded like it was no big deal. If it only came to devouring it, then he had no problems even with circuits he had never seen before. If he wasn’t able to, then there was no way Zagan could have used sorcery to protect himself when he killed Andras.

After taking all that in, Bifrons writhed about in amusement.

“I see, I see... Truly an abominable talent. It seems our choice was correct, wasn’t it? You’re growing at a rather terrifying rate.”

Even though Bifrons should have been driven into a corner, their smile was filled with joy. As expected, they didn’t seem to be such a poor sorcerer that they balked upon losing the sigil. Zagan recalled the bottomless eeriness of the Archdemons he felt that day.

Still, at this point, it’s a question of whether Bifrons’ trump card comes out.

Bifrons was eerie precisely because Zagan was unable to get a read on them. In fact, it wasn’t clear if they even planned on using it at all. Bifrons had called this a sideshow. It wasn’t even clear if they were interested in seriously fighting, so Zagan doubted they would willingly expose a trump card. And it seemed that doubt was well-founded. As Zagan drew nearer while being thoroughly vigilant of his surroundings, the eeriness he felt from Bifrons had completely vanished. Then, Bifrons waved the white flag of surrender.

“Fufufu, okay, I’ve got the general gist of your power now. Shall

we end things peacefully?"

"I don't feel the need to do that."

"Huh...?!" Bifrons exclaimed, clearly confused. They had tried to end things all on their own, but Zagan hadn't yet calmed the anger welling up within him. And as Zagan released the mana loaded into his fist, Bifrons panicked for the very first time that night. Even Nephteros, who was standing next to Bifrons, shrank back with a pale face.

"W-Wait! You're misunderstanding things. This really was supposed to be a sideshow. Look, in the end, your elf didn't come to any harm, right?"

"She came to enough harm. I don't need an apology, but from this point on, I'm doing things my way."

From what Zagan could tell, Bifrons did not have any sorcery or other such things set up for protection. And so, he once more raised his fist.

"You're one of those damn Archdemons. You won't die from a simple punch, right?"

If Bifrons was such an easy opponent, then Zagan would surely be able to take the heads of all twelve other Archdemons in short order.

In response to his words, Bifrons shook their head vigorously.

"Any sorcerer would die from being punched by you!"

Of course, something like healing sorcery couldn't be used before Zagan. With both the Sigil of the Archdemon and sorcery sealed, it was true that even an Archdemon might suffer a fatal blow. Though it was difficult to imagine that a sorcerer who'd lived for several hundred years would meet their end so easily.

Well, not like I give a crap, he thought. And just as he was about to mercilessly swing his fist down...

"Celestian. Don't you want to know about the connection between your elf and the Sacred Swords?"

Zagan's fist came to a stop a hair's breadth from Bifrons' nose. And with cold sweat coming down their cheek, Bifrons raised both index fingers and continued speaking.

"Just think about it, okay? I mean, what was the purpose of me going out of my way to show your elf the power of my Nephteros?"

"...Are you saying you intended to make Nephy conscious of Celestian?"

"Exactly. A power that even we Archdemons are unable to manipulate can be easily controlled by those girls. Is it not the nature of a sorcerer to pursue such things?" Bifrons questioned. Wagging a finger with a tsk tsk, they continued, "We are both Archdemons with an elf at our side. Isn't it obvious that I wanted to compare your growth to ours?"

“What a shameless lie. You’ve been monitoring us ever since I bought Nephy, so there was never any need for that...” Zagan only realized that fact when he was sent the invitation letter, but that was more than enough. He knew there was no need to test anything, since this sorcerer had been watching Zagan and the others the whole time.

That’s exactly why I want to settle things right here.

If Zagan didn’t make it clear that there was little to gain from laying their hands on Zagan and his companions, then others with bad intentions would not step aside. Plus, if Zagan let it slide this time, then Bifrons would undoubtedly meddle with them again.

“Oh my, so you’ve known for quite a while, then. Seems I’ve made light of you a little... Now, could you lower that hand of yours already?”

Glaring at the irritating Archdemon who implored him to calm down, Zagan let out a sigh. *Even if I slug him here, this guy will just shrug it off.*

No matter how much bloodthirst or wrath Zagan threw at Bifrons, there was no resistance at all. In the end, it all seemed meaningless. If Zagan wanted retribution, then this method wouldn’t work. He needed to rethink his approach.

And so, Zagan withdrew his fist. That action marked a shift in the first meeting between these two Archdemons.



As Zagan’s hostility dissipated, Chastille let out a sigh of relief, and Nephy stood back up. Looking over the deck that had fallen deathly silent, Bifrons snapped their fingers.

“Oh, come on, what’s wrong? The music has stopped. I’d like a gloomy, cheerful piece here!”

And with that extremely contradictory request, the face of the musical troupe’s siren spasmed. Still, she was a professional, so she began skillfully singing a boisterous song in a gloomy tune.

As one would expect, it was not an atmosphere that allowed the guests to kick back and relax, but they all at least understood that any acts of violence had come to an end. And so, the sorcerers all let down their guards for the time being. However, after giving a sidelong glance to the deck, Foll tightly gripped onto the hem of Zagan’s robe.

“Zagan, is this an Archdemon?”

“Seems so. Be careful. This guy hasn’t said a thing about their true motive yet.”

Bifrons’ entire bearing was theatrical, leading Zagan to believe that every single thing they’d done so far was all part of an act. Even when Bifrons picked a fight, it never seemed like they had any intention to seriously fight Zagan. And even when Bifrons fell to the

ground, Zagan couldn't sense any tension or fear within their countenance. Having said that, it also didn't seem like Bifrons was trying to lure Zagan into a false sense of security.

That was why he had been unable to surmise Bifrons' true goal thus far. If Zagan were a sorcerer who was good at seeing through lies, then he would likely have been taken aback by how every single word that came out of this Archdemon's mouth was littered with falsehoods.

It would be better for you not to trust a sorcerer, you know? Sorcerers are all liars, after all.

Zagan recalled what Gremory had said earlier. Bifrons was a sorcerer who seemed to coat absolutely everything in lies, so her advice seemed sound in this specific instance.

Foll then stared up at Zagan, inquiring further.

"Then, there's no reason to kill them yet?"

"Probably not."

"What's Celestian?"

"I wonder. This guy probably knows, but I can't tell if they feel like sharing."

Upon hearing that, Bifrons pasted a greatly perplexed expression on their face and shrugged their shoulders.

"My dear comrade, I think it would be better for you to reconsider the way you educate your daughter. It's not good to simply assume you'll end up killing a person you just met."

"I'd say it'd be worse not be cautious around something you're not even sure is human..."

Zagan thought further on the matter, then realized he still didn't know whether this sorcerer was a man or woman.

Though, this guy'd definitely just evade the question if I ask.

In any case, he was sure Bifrons would just reply, 'Well, which do you think I am?' and no matter what Zagan answered, it was clear as day that Bifrons would just laugh it off as the opposite.

"...You're right. It only looks like it's talking. Feels like I'm watching a poorly manipulated puppet or something," Foll remarked.

The term puppet was an apt description. This sorcerer's shallow conduct was certainly like a puppet being poorly controlled by a bungling clown. No matter how silly the puppet looked, the clown would simply sneer at it.

"My my, calling me a puppet is a little mean, don't you think? Even I have a heart here. And honestly, being insulted by an innocent little girl wounds it terribly. Ahaha."

Foll also seemed to gradually come to terms with the eeriness of Bifrons, which made her hide behind Zagan while forming a clearly disgusted face. And, as Foll scowled at Bifrons, Nephy finally appeared to calm down and drew closer alongside Chastille. Seeing that,

Nephteros aimed a glancing glare at her.

“...You damn slave.”

Even though she was wearing a dress, Nephy had a boorish collar wrapped around her neck. However, it was not proof of a master and his slave. Instead, it was proof of the connection between Zagan and Nephy. Having that ridiculed was not something that Nephy could just take quietly.

“This collar is a symbol of my bond with Master Zagan. No matter who they may be, I shall not forgive any who insult it.”

“...So, what will you do? You sheltered good for nothing. Are you saying a mere bitch intends to act like a normal person?”

Nephy was being insulted right in front of Zagan’s eyes. He seemed to be ready to take a swing at Nephteros because of that, but Nephy replied in a firm tone before he could.

“Only I can truly decide what I am. Nothing you or anyone else says can ever change that.”

Zagan was overcome with emotion when he heard Nephy’s dignified response. *She’s finally able to respond properly to insults!*

The change in Nephy made him want to hug her tightly, rub his cheek against her, and praise her. Still, Zagan knew it wasn’t his place to cut into their conversation. Though Nephteros looked daunted for a single instant, she immediately formed a scornful smile.

“...Quit making excuses. The fact that you’re even saying that collar is a symbol of your bond proves you’re a slave at heart.”

“...”

The dark elf still snapped back at Nephy, leaving Zagan somewhat puzzled.

This girl... Rather than being a little obstinate, she’s just irritating, huh? He didn’t intend to say anything, but the whole conversation was really pissing him off. Zagan bought Nephy after falling in love at first sight, but in the end, that was because of Nephy’s nature. Even though this girl had the same face as her, Zagan didn’t feel anything toward her. In all likelihood, even if he punched her, he wouldn’t think anything of it. That was why Zagan casually lifted his right hand and showed her his palm.

“Eeep?”

Nephteros yelped, likely remembering when he was crushing her cheeks earlier. Then, she trembled with a start and sprang up.

“Ah... My ears are tingling because I’ve been listening to such unpleasant words,” Zagan said as he began listlessly scratching his ear. It was childish harassment, but having fallen for that, Nephteros’ face was dyed bright red.

“...Hmph.” Foll snickered, eyes full of pity.

“...You bastards!” Nephteros let out an angered voice in response,

and Raphael muttered to Foll as a result, chiding her.

“Hear me, Foll. A weak dog is one who often barks. It is fine to just laugh it off and forgive them.”

“Ahahahaha... Like that?” Foll laughed in a voice completely devoid of emotion, and standing next to her, Chastille looked over at Nephteros, clearly feeling sorry for her.

“You guys, Nephy already responded, so any more is going too far.”

On some occasions, sympathy could wound people. Being thought of as pitiful by Chastille, who had been nothing but a crybaby until mere moments ago, made Nephteros’ face twist with rage.

“...I’ll kill you!”

“Now now, if you take on all these children at once, you’ll get killed before you can strike them all down. You may be able to take one or two with you, but I won’t be helping you,” Bifrons said as they let out a loud laugh. Then, they continued, “My servant here has been quite crude, I suppose. Well, all of you also responded in kind, so do forgive her with that. I already told you this, but I chose to hold this evening ball because I wanted to talk to you.”

After that, Bifrons spread out their arms in an exaggerated manner and lorded over the deck.

“So, how do you like it? My boat, I mean. I do believe you enjoyed the sideshow as well, correct?”

Though suspicious, Zagan honestly nodded.

“Let’s see. You’ve got good taste in boats. Thanks to that, my people here were able to enjoy themselves. Or at least, that was the case until you went and did something so damn unnecessary.”

“Hahaha, well, that’s all that matters. Sadly, most sorcerers don’t even pay attention to the surrounding scenery, so I was troubled that there wasn’t anybody enjoying themselves. Right, Nephteros?”

Nephteros respectfully bowed down without giving off a single hint of the anger she was displaying before in response to being beckoned.

“I believe that sorcerers who empathize with your pastimes are the odd ones out, Master Bifrons.”

“Hahaha, it seems she’s being shy. I know it may seem like she’s treating me coldly, but I assure you this child is the one who understands me best.”

“Paying respect to a master who calls the one who understands them best a doll is extremely difficult, after all.”

Zagan was being continuously driven to raise his eyebrow at their rather odd relationship, but it seemed she took offense to being called a cute little doll earlier. And, as she looked at Bifrons with cold eyes, like she was looking at a piece of trash, Bifrons formed a bitter smile.

“Well, as you can see, my elf is quite rebellious. I wouldn’t mind some advice on how to have a harmonious relationship like you two.” With a ‘moreover,’ Bifrons gazed at Foll, Chastille, and Raphael in turn behind Zagan, then said, “You have gathered people beneath you of completely different races and influence, yet they do not come into conflict. I must say, this is a rather shocking sight.”

Zagan let out a small sigh.

“Is the reason you called us here to tell worthless jokes?”

“Calling it a joke is a bit much. Even though you have such a foul mouth, for some reason, people gather around you. Is it strange to find that envious?”

“Is an Archdemon something that feels envy?”

“Even an Archdemon experiences solitude,” Bifrons said, then stretched out their hand to the dark elf next to him. However, she avoided it with a plainly displeased expression on her face.

“Ahahaha. Hey, aren’t I a lonely one?”

Zagan couldn’t tell just how serious Bifrons was as they began cackling loudly. And next to Bifrons, Nephteros placed her hand against her brow as if she had a headache.

I don’t like her, but it seems she’s stuck in a pretty unfortunate situation.

Regardless of his disdain for the girl, seeing a person with the same face as Nephy twist her face in anguish didn’t feel good to Zagan. And, as if not paying any attention to their servant’s state, Bifrons grinned broadly and laughed.

“Now then, the night is young. Shall we enjoy the party?” Bifrons questioned, their eerie smile making it impossible to tell what they were truly thinking. Zagan then answered with a disconcerted expression.

“...I’d like to get down to business about now, though.”

“Oh my, and here I thought the conversation had finally lightened up.”

“I was just being polite.”

For the time being, Zagan was a guest. He would at least respond if prompted, but he didn’t have enough spare time to waste any on idle chatter. If he had nothing to gain from Bifrons, then in his mind, it would be several thousand times more significant to just return to the castle and talk with Nephy instead. Upon hearing that response, Bifrons pouted, as if annoyed by Zagan’s boring words.

“My goodness. Well, whatever. I managed to enjoy myself a fair bit, anyway...” Bifrons drew closer and came up in front of Nephy. However, Zagan obstructed them with his hand, fully implying that Bifrons would not be permitted to draw any closer.

I don’t have any idea what this guy plans to do, so better safe than

sorry.

Bifrons then raised both hands as if surrendering.

"It's not like she'll catch a disease just from me touching her or anything, you know?"

"No, she will," Zagan replied, dead serious, leaving Bifrons taken aback.

Even so, Bifrons began to speak gallantly.

"Shall we get right to the point, then? It's about your elf, you see. True, she's an elf, but she also isn't."

"What do you mean?"

Zagan squinted his eyes, and Bifrons explained the truth in a clear, calm voice.

"High elf, that's the name of her race."

That name made Zagan's eyes shoot open.

"A high elf... you say?"

He had never heard of that race before. He thought it was likely some race of higher ranking within the elves, but Zagan had never seen it mentioned in the grimoires or documents that he had read.

"That's right. It is said that elves inherited the blood of ancient gods, and among them, those that are closest to pure-blooded gods are high elves."

Zagan knew that elves were an existence closely related to gods and spirits, but he never thought that they truly inherited the blood of the gods. Bifrons then continued speaking, as if pleased with Zagan's reaction.

"But, well, it's not so simple to preserve a purebred lineage. The high elves gradually decreased in number, and now they have completely perished. All that's left are ordinary elves with slightly elevated mana, nothing but the failures known as half-elves."

However, Nephy was in fact here. In other words...

"So atavism is possible, huh?" Zagan muttered, and Bifrons nodded with a satisfied look.

"Fufufu, it helps that you catch on so quickly."

Zagan didn't overlook the fact that Nephy's ears quivered in a troubled manner.

"Nephy, if you have some sort of doubt, then I don't mind if you speak of it."

"But..."

In response to Nephy looking over to Bifrons with a mindful gaze, the small Archdemon put a hand to their chest and nodded.

"Fufufu, are you paying mind not to cut into the conversation between the two masters here? How cute. Still, I don't mind. This is a conversation about your origins, after all. You may ask about anything you don't understand."

Even as Nephy's ears quivered in bewilderment, she timidly cut to the chase.

"Then, I have a question. What does atavism mean?"

"Oops, silly me. It certainly isn't a phrase that is generally spoken," Bifrons said as he approached Nephy, trying to get overly familiar, which made Zagan cut in to stop them.

"Atavism is, in a manner of speaking, the reappearance of a characteristic from a previous generation."

"The reappearance of a characteristic...?"

"Yeah. It's extremely rare among sorcerers, but in the bloodlines of ordinary humans, there are cases where a child is born with extremely strong mana. It's a phenomenon that can occur if a distant ancestor was a sorcerer. In your case, Nephy, it likely means that the diluted high elf blood that was mixed into the other elves was resurrected in you," Zagan replied as such. However, Bifrons wagged their finger with a tsk, tsk.

"That is an exemplary answer, but you don't get a perfect score," Bifrons claimed as they donned a smarmy smile, then said, "You see, atavism doesn't only apply to a case where mana is inherited. There are also instances where an ancestor was cursed, and that appears within a distant descendant."

Nephy's eyes widened as she heard those words. Cursed child. Nephy was scorned as such in the elven village, so it was no wonder that they had such an impact on her.



Bifrons simply nodded in satisfaction upon seeing her reaction.

“Fufufu, your face is telling me you’ve heard those words before. Surely to those measly elves, your white hair and mysticism appeared to be a curse. After all, it is far too grand a power for that inferior species.”

Perhaps in the past, there were other children who held power like Nephy’s in the elven village. Children who possessed an unknown power. It certainly was something to be feared, but Zagan believed that they may have also envied the power that they had lost. That was why the elves called the children with white hair cursed children and persecuted them. The way they clung to her when the humans invaded was proof. Elves were rather proud at heart, so they couldn’t stand anything that devalued them. Thinking of it that way, Nephteros’ personality was extremely elf-like.

Not knowing how to handle that reality, Nephy turned pale and began trembling. And with a chuckle, Bifrons bowed down in front of Nephy.

“Come now, there is no need to lament your fate. You are a descendant of a proud race of high elves. You would do well to follow in your master’s footsteps and act a little more arrogant.”

“That’s none of your concern.”

Seeing that Bifrons was trying to instill a strange thought into her mind, Zagan forced his way between them and Nephy.

“Setting aside the talks of Nephy having atavism, what’s your basis that she’s a high elf? They should already be an extinct race, right?”

It wasn’t like Nephy had a completely different appearance from that of normal elves. There should have been a reason that Bifrons was convinced she was a member of a long extinct race. And as they heard that, Bifrons’ mouth twisted upward. It seemed Bifrons had been waiting for that.

“Of course. Even setting aside her knowledge of Celestian, the biggest reason is her characteristic white hair. It’s said that all high elves possessed pure white hair and azure eyes.”

That certainly did conform with Nephy’s appearance...

“And above all else, they held the power to manipulate nature and to heal the wounds of even the dead simply by wishing for it.”

Nephy had demonstrated such abilities before Zagan many times already. There was no way that Bifrons, who was monitoring all of them from the start, didn’t know of it. Nevertheless, Zagan let out a snort.

“That’s quite the exaggerated legend. It’s certainly true that Nephy was able to heal the wounds caused by a Sacred Sword, but it’s not

like she can save the dead.”

As Zagan pointed that out, Bifrons stared at him in wonder like his response was rather unexpected.

“Oh? Did you not notice?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Kufufu, my my, there’s no mistaking it. Your elf can even revive the dead. Listen, even death has something like stages. A corpse that has been reduced to bones probably can’t be revived, sure, but she is able to resuscitate the body of someone who is facing death.”

“...I-It can’t be!” Nephy opened her eyes wide at those words.

“Do you remember something?”

“...Yes. When I was attacked in Kianoides, the town got caught up in it. I thought that Master Zagan’s sorcery had saved them.”

Zagan certainly did set up a barrier for the purpose of protecting Kianoides, so Nephy likely didn’t report what happened because she thought it was his doing.

“Now, doesn’t that seem odd to you? I mean, sorcerers can turn those who have died into the undead, but we are unable to revive them. At the very least, sorcery has such restrictions. And so, the fact that she was able to do something completely out of our grasp proves that she’s a high elf.”

Zagan found himself unable to refute Bifrons when so much evidence was piling up. At that, Bifrons nodded in satisfaction.

“It’s been about three hundred years since I became a sorcerer, but this is the first time I’ve been able to meet a high elf. It’s truly vexing that I didn’t manage to get my hands on her.”

Zagan felt a strange feeling stir within him due to that brief remark. He then stole a glance at Nephy, who had turned pale from the devastating reality thrust upon her. It was to the point where he believed that she would collapse if they spoke any further, which was why he hesitated to put such doubts into words. Still, despite his misgivings, Zagan threw a question at Bifrons.

“...So basically, the bastard who instigated the attack on Nephy’s village... was you?”

Nephy’s eyes shot open like she was unable to believe it. As for Bifrons, they simply nodded as if it was no big deal.

“Yeah, that’s right, but what of it? Even though I took great pains to lay claim to a high elf, Marchosias snatched her away from me. And, since that geezer died right away, I completely lost the trail. So on top of that, you ended up with her.”

“Is... that so...” Nephy muttered as if it concerned someone else.

Huh? It looks like she doesn’t really mind...

No, it wasn’t that she didn’t mind. In fact, it would be better to say that she hadn’t properly come to grips with it. For the time being,

Zagan squeezed Nephy's hand tight.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes." Contrary to expectation, Nephy returned a reassuring nod.

"My village may have been attacked because of me. If that's true, then I have to own up to it, but I won't fall into despair."

"I see... Nephy, you've grown strong."

After Zagan praised her, Nephy puffed out her cheeks as she looked up at him.

"Master Zagan, were you not the one who told me to stay strong?" Nephy said, smiling as she spoke, "I have been saved by your words, Master Zagan. And so, I will never give in to such depressing thoughts again."

Zagan then recalled what he said. *Aren't they dead? Forget about them. There's no way for them to keep complaining at this point.*

That was what Zagan said to her upon hearing of the fate of her village. It appeared that Nephy had cherished those words and believed in them wholeheartedly.

Bifrons then made a sour face, like her reaction was boring them to tears.

"Tch... And here I thought you'd be a little more surprised. Well, whatever. Ahaha."

The reaction was akin to someone lamenting that an innocent prank had failed. However, there was nothing wrong with that. This was the true nature of sorcerers, and such barbarity was what made Zagan falter when he initially faced the Archdemons.

I don't want Nephy getting mixed up with this lot, so I have to deal with those damn Archdemons as quickly as I can. Yes, the Archdemons were nothing but obstructions who were keeping his beloved from living under the light of the sun.

"Have I convinced you that she's a high elf, then? If I have, I'd really like to move on, since that's really not my main point here," Bifrons continued.

"You wanted to speak about Celestian, right?" Zagan asserted, and Bifrons nodded back to him in turn.

"Ever since I first became an Archdemon, I've been studying everything related to Celestian," Bifrons claimed, then paused for a moment before pointing out the sigil on their left arm and saying, "And after all my research, I've concluded that this Sigil of the Archdemon is something woven together with formulas using Celestian."

After hearing Bifrons cut to the heart of the matter, Zagan's eyebrow shot up.

"So my hunch was right on the money, then."

The one issue was, even Nephy was unable to read the letters

present on the sigil. Guessing what Zagan was thinking, Bifrons nodded with a smug look.

“What you’re thinking of is correct. Still, after researching it for three hundred years, there’s a problem I haven’t been able to unravel quite yet. And since it isn’t so easy to deal with, I’ve been troubled this entire time.”

Bifrons was an eerie sorcerer, but their power as an Archdemon was real. And it seemed even this Archdemon was unable to solve the mysteries of the sigil. *It seems this road will be quite long.*

Bifrons then raised an index finger skyward and continued speaking.

“Back then, when Nephteros showed you her power, you should have understood it, but—”

Zagan tilted his head to the side with an ‘Oh?’ as he cut off Bifrons.

“I didn’t see it, and this is the first I’ve ever heard of it.”

After being mercilessly interrupted, Bifrons’ mouth popped open.

“Wait, you didn’t hear? Really?”

“Yeah. I know nothing about it.”

“My my, isn’t it fine not to tease me like that... What, not going to get serious...? Wait, you actually didn’t know?”

Completely taken aback, Bifrons looked over to Nephy.

“Um, he’s kidding, right? Did you... really not say anything to your master?”

“I wasn’t sure how to explain what happened...”

Bifrons drew closer to her in disbelief, while Nephy retreated back behind Zagan and simply returned a small nod.

“What? Why would that be hard? Nephteros, did you do so little that it wasn’t worth mentioning at all?”

“...I wasn’t really ordered to engage in a fight or anything.”

“With your personality, there’s no way that you would pass up on the chance to harass a high elf!” Bifrons howled, then began scratching their head. It seemed that something in their plans didn’t go so smoothly. That fact delighted Zagan, who began gently brushing Nephy’s head as a reward.

“You hung on well, Nephy. Thanks to you, it seems we were able to mess with Bifrons.”

“...G-Glad to help!”

In the end, she was likely quite distressed about everything. Still, Zagan felt like this was the first time in a while that he heard such a cheerful voice from her.

Extremely dispirited, the tiny Archdemon continued speaking in an exasperated tone.

“Well, you see, um, there’s this thing like sorcery I created using

the fruits of my three hundreds years of research into Celestian. Just think about it, mysticism is awfully unstable, right? But if we use Celestian, it can be controlled and developed into something stronger.”

Zagan had taught Nephy sorcery mainly because he wanted her to have a means to protect herself, but also in order to help her freely manipulate her mysticism. However, it seemed Bifrons had taken that research one step further.

“That’s why, you see, I tried to have Nephteros use that around Nephy. And, you know, it’s not like I’m in open conflict with you, so I didn’t give a direct order or anything, but I kind of wanted to goad you a little like that... Or wait, no, how do I put it...”

“You’re the worst,” replied Zagan.

“Yeah... The worst. Nephy was super sad,” Foll followed up with contempt.

With that, Bifrons grew even more dispirited.

“I hate you people. Don’t you think you should show a little more respect when you’re standing before an Archdemon?”

“...Can we head home now?” Zagan had started to find this discussion more and more tiresome, and Bifrons insisted on continuing it even as their face twisted in humiliation. It seemed there was something Bifrons desperately wanted Zagan to hear.

“Anyway, Celestian is composed of words that contain innate power, so by developing sorcery with the language, you get celestial mysticism!”

“And what, you had that girl use it?” Zagan looked over to Nephteros as he asked that question, and Bifrons nodded in response.

“You’ve got it. And yet, Nephy didn’t even report that to her master... Tell me, isn’t that power pretty noteworthy?”

It seemed Bifrons was mortified that the culmination of their centuries-long pursuit was brushed to the wayside. And, as Zagan made an exasperated face, Bifrons calmed down and cleared their throat.

“Basically, this Sigil of the Archdemon is also woven together with Celestian and is at a terrifyingly higher level than my own creations. That is my conclusion,” Bifrons said, then looked over to Nephteros and continued, “As you can see, Nephteros is also a high elf, and she has studied celestial mysticism. I tried to have her spur on your elf, but it looks like I didn’t really get the result I was hoping for.”

The color of her eyes was golden, and rather than snow-white hair, hers was more silver, but Nephteros certainly did have an appearance close to that of a high elf. It was the nature of sorcerers to want to put the results of their research to the test, and that also appeared to apply to the Archdemons. However, Zagan recalled a

certain doubt about that point.

I thought Bifrons said this was their first time meeting a high elf like Nephy in three hundred years...? In that case, where exactly did this Nephteros come from? It was possible that she served Bifrons before he found Nephy, but could their identical face truly be a mere coincidence? An indescribable sense of discomfort began welling up within Zagan. He couldn't tell if Bifrons noticed the doubts within him, but they then shifted their gaze over to Nephy.

"I'd like to check, but can you use celestial mysticism?"

"...I'm not sure. If I studied it, then maybe, but I've never tried."

"Hm, I feel like I finally got the answer I've been hoping for.

Seems even the high elves don't have the techniques of lost traditions passed down to them."

Bifrons was clearly giddy about gaining brand new information, but it also sounded like they were boasting. Suspecting the reason, Zagan let out a deep sigh before speaking.

"Then, did you call us all here just to unveil the results of your research?"

"Fufufu, partially, yes. But I'm not done talking yet. Don't be in such a rush," Bifrons said, putting on airs all the while, before explaining, "I mentioned this Sigil of the Archdemon was woven together using celestial mysticism, right? Then, that begs the question, what exactly is its purpose? And, just like I thought, the only suitable person to discuss this with is a fellow Archdemon who also keeps a high elf at his side. Zagan, you've learned of the existence of demons within this world, haven't you?"

"...Well, yeah," Zagan professed. And that made sense, as he was looking for a means to oppose them.

"Among those demons, as one would expect, there exists an eternal being that ranks above all others. Having said that, it would be confusing to call it an Archdemon, so I'll just refer to it as the Demon Lord. This is also something that the church agrees on, so I'm not alone on that front. Of course, according to them, the twelve wielders of Sacred Swords were the ones who brought an end to that creature's reign of terror."

Bifrons' attention shifted over to Chastille and Raphael. Since Bifrons had been monitoring them, it was only obvious, but it seemed the Archdemon had seen through the fact that the one donning Valefor's armor was Raphael.

Zagan then shrugged his shoulders.

"The Sacred Swords are certainly powerful, but I highly doubt that's true."

At the very least, Zagan didn't think they would be able to get defeat the demon he once came face to face with. And that king or

lord or god or whatever it was among them would have likely been far harder to deal with. He was sure that was the case, but Bifrons simply shook a finger to the sides with a tsk, tsk.

“Well, I for one don’t think it’s necessarily a lie. If it was cut to pieces by twelve Sacred Swords, then the remains would be in thirteen pieces, right?”

There were thirteen Sigils of the Archdemon. As that fact struck him, Zagan lowered his gaze to his own sigil.

“In other words, whatever was cut to pieces by the Sacred Swords is set inside our sigils?”

“Fufufu, come now, it’s fine to be more direct,” Bifrons said, holding out their left arm, then carried on with, “I believe the Sigil of the Archdemon is what seals the husk of the Demon Lord.”

Zagan tightly gripped his right hand. It was something he realized ever so vaguely. Why was it that the demon obeyed the Sigil of the Archdemon? Where exactly did that colossal amount of mana come from? Also, why did the sigils resonate with each other?

The Sigil of the Archdemon seals the Demon Lord.

In fact, the thirteen Archdemons may have been sorcerers who were supposed to serve as guardians of the seal. Nowadays, they were reduced to nothing but despicable monsters in the eyes of the general populace, though.

Zagan then looked over to Chastille and Raphael.

So basically, the Sacred Swords themselves created that seal...? Even if that wasn’t true, Bifrons seemed to believe it. And if that were the case, then the current Sacred Swords had lost their original power, or perhaps there was a different way of using them.

Bifrons then cut in with a ‘however.’

“Where did their battle take place? It may have been in the unexplored regions of Norden, or in the area the church set up their holy city. My theory is that it wasn’t settled after a single fight, so there has to be more than one option.”

Zagan squinted his eyes at that.

“Wait, you’re not saying...”

“Fufufu, it seems you’ve finally realized why we’re here, huh?” Bifrons said, then spread out both their arms in a grandiose manner and claimed, “Yes, a battle against the Demon Lord once took place in Suflaghida.”

Zagan then noticed that the sigil on his right hand, which had its power sealed in the squabble with Bifrons, was throbbing as if it contained heat.

It can’t be... The sigil isn’t reacting to Bifrons, but the lake itself?

At the same time as Zagan realized that, Bifrons’ sigil began to fill with the light of mana. And then he remembered. Bifrons had called

the clash with Zagan a sideshow. In that case, what was the main act?

“Now then, let us unveil what happens when two Sigils of the Archdemon gather on the land where the Demon Lord once fought!”

The Sigils of the Archdemon gradually shined more and more. This time, even Zagan couldn't stop it... Eventually, the previously serene lake was dyed the color of hell.

Chapter IV: Since the Stars Seem to Be About to Fall, I Thought I'd Try Dancing a Little

Nephteros learned of that girl's existence several months ago. Her master, Bifrons, had shown her through a projection within a crystal. Since Nephteros had been serving under Bifrons from the moment she gained awareness, she never once questioned what race she belonged to or where she came from. All she knew was that she was proud of the fact that she served an Archdemon, and that being needed by said Archdemon brought her joy above all else. Upon hearing of a girl with the same face and race as her, Nephteros' curiosity was piqued.

However, that girl was made to wear clothes like rags, had chains around her feet, and was being treated like a slave. Watching a girl with the same face as her going through such suffering gripped at her heart.

'I want to save her,' so she strongly wished to herself.

Is there any way... I can get that girl to also serve Master Bifrons? If that were possible, then rather than let anyone else do so, she wanted to go and save that girl herself. She had power gifted to her by an Archdemon, after all. And after that, as her senior, Nephteros would teach her all sorts of things. Yes, she was sure it would go that way. However...

"Take a look, Nephteros. She's a perfect high elf, just like the ones I've been looking for. With this, I'll be able to bring my research on celestial mysticism to the next level."

Nephteros was unable to understand the meaning of those words. If this girl was the high elf her master desired... *Then, what am I...?*

A dark grudge began to grow within Nephteros. All the sympathy and affinity she felt for that girl changed into a burning hatred. And perhaps due to good fortune, that girl did not end up coming into Bifrons' service.

Her village was assaulted by humans, and her whereabouts had become unknown. It was unfortunate that Nephteros was unable to see her last moments, but she thought it served that girl right. Bifrons pursued the girl's whereabouts, but it seemed another Archdemon was interfering, and Bifrons was unable to grasp her location.

In that case, it was only natural for Bifrons to cherish Nephteros

more than the girl that couldn't be obtained. And Nephteros believed that her peaceful days, which had been thrown out of order, had returned to normal at last.

And yet, she survived. It seemed she had been picked up by another Archdemon, and was now able to make such a happy looking face that her previous miserable figure seemed like a fantasy. Looking at that, Bifrons let out a voice filled with vexation from the very bottom of their heart.

"How disappointing. Snatching her away from a fellow Archdemon is far too risky, even if he's a newcomer."

Normally, she was unable to tell what her master was thinking, but at that time, Bifrons was letting out a deep sigh. As long as that girl was alive, her master's envy would not vanish. And Nephteros would never be her master's favorite.

It was unforgivable.

That was why, when Bifrons told her that it was alright to contact that girl, Nephteros felt like dancing in delight. Bifrons never told her not to lay a hand on that girl. As long as she didn't kill her, Bifrons would surely not complain.

If I thoroughly beat her down, Master Bifrons will surely lose interest in her. She would prove that the one her master needed most was not that girl. However, Nephteros was unable to defeat her. No, forget defeating her, Nephteros was overwhelmed against someone who was holding back because of where they were fighting.

It was then that she came to realize the girl was using the power her master desired. And just as she felt herself going mad from the injustice of it all, her master once more relied on her.

"I thought up an amusing show. You may put your power on full display!"

At that, Nephteros decided she would not lose ever again.



Something began swirling about between Zagan and Bifrons, coming from center of their Sigils of the Archdemon.

A world of darkness with no light. It was a vortex of mana that far surpassed the demon chimera that Marchosias had left behind, or even the demon that Barbatos had summoned. It overflowed from the depths of the lake and engulfed the ship.

"Aahahahaha! This is amazing! When it comes to the sheer quantity of mana, doesn't this even surpass the thirteen Archdemons?! Ahahahaha! AHAHAHA!" Bifrons exclaimed with crazed laughter.

"Bifrons! Are you goddamn insane? You're planning on reviving the Demon Lord?!"

And in response to Zagan's angry roar, Bifrons simply laughed.

“No way! You can’t call something like this the Demon Lord. At most, it’s but its dregs, nothing more than its residual thoughts. And it simply awoke upon reacting to the Sigils of the Archdemon.”
Simple residue possesses this much power? Are you saying that such a monster existed?

It truly was an existence akin to a god. It was a power on a different level. One man could never hope to reach it.

Before long, the vortex of mana took on mass and materialized. While watching that unfold, Zagan unintentionally let out a disgusted voice.

“What... is that...?”

It was ‘sludge.’ If not for its clear shape, which resembled an idol, it was impossible to sense anything like a human within it. It was as if malice itself had concentrated into a visible form, turning into a repulsive mound of dirty sludge.

It’s huge...

Its source was a massive cluster of mana. Even though the sludge was large enough to completely cover the entire boat, it was still swelling in size. However, the fact that it possessed mass meant that gravity had an effect on it, too. And so, the swelling sludge plummeted to the surface of the lake just like that, making a pillar of water shoot into the air.

As the ship violently shook about, the skeleton performers from the musical troupe were thrown off the deck, but the sorcerers all put themselves on guard using sorcery. As for Chastille, Raphael, and the others, they were clinging onto the deck and had escaped being thrown off.

And then came silence. Just as they thought it was about to launch an attack, the sludge did nothing but float there.

“...Huh?”

This also seemed unexpected to Bifrons, who let out an idiotic voice.

No, the mana itself is still swelling up even more. Moreover, that sludge shouldn’t have been a living creature or anything. Zagan didn’t believe it would stop what it was doing because it hit the water. The problem was that they had no idea what the sludge was doing at all. This didn’t only apply to Zagan’s group, either. In fact, all the sorcerers on board were holding back their breath as they vigilantly observed the water’s surface.

And as the second hand of the clock took a full lap and the hour hand crept along a little further, nothing happened. One of the sorcerers then wiped their brow, letting out a sudden laugh.

“Hah. Nothing’s going on.”

And at that exact moment...

“Gaaah!”

That very same sorcerer let out a muffled scream. And upon looking over at him, everyone spotted a single stake sticking out of the deck.

No, that's not a stake! Zagan could feel goosebumps run across his skin.

“Be careful! It's already got hold of the ship!”

The stake was actually made of sludge that seeped into the deck. It was quietly creeping across the ship, mimicking the effect of cotton absorbing water.

At this rate, if anybody is inside the ship... They would be helpless. It was likely that there were no survivors left within the ship. Though it appeared the sorcerer on the deck who was attacked was still alive.

“Gah, argh, s-save, me...”

The sorcerer was gurgling as he screamed like he was drowning, but before long, a black sludge poured out of all the orifices of his body, and he crumbled. Nephy gulped, and Chastille clenched her teeth as if unable to hold back her urge to vomit.

Was he... eaten? It was completely different from how Zagan ‘ate’ sorcery. The sorcerer's body was melting away from the inside and was swallowed whole. After seeing that atrocious scene play out, fear began to spread even among the sorcerers.

“Ugh, o lightning, burn them to ashes!”

“Come, o crimson flames.”

The sorcerers launched attacks of fire and lightning, but all that did was burn the outer surface of the sludge.

No, it's taking in the sorcery? The sludge swelled in size as it took more and more hits.

“Don't attack! It's just absorbing everything!” Zagan yelled out, which made the sorcerers immediately stop their attacks. These were the sorcerers who held enough power to be invited to the evening ball of an Archdemon. Unable to find a means of attack, they promptly distanced themselves from the deck. Sorcery that allowed one to fly was not at all rare, after all.

Zagan also escaped into the skies with Nephy and Chastille in his arms, while Foll grew out her dragon wings and was supporting Raphael as she took her distance from the deck.

“W-Wait, my Sacred Sword is still stowed away on the ship,” Chastille screamed, pale in the face.

“Like now's the time to worry about that!”

It didn't matter where it was stowed away, as the inside of the ship had already been engulfed by the sludge. The sorcerers who broke away from the ship then began to carry on and flee, but...

“Ugh, the hell is this?”

Suddenly, as if obstructed by an invisible wall, the sorcerers were pushed back to the vicinity of the ship.

"Ahahahaha, the show has just started, you know? Don't be so cold and leave without even watching the main event."

It was Bifrons. It seemed the Archdemon had put up some sort of barrier to keep the other sorcerers from escaping.

If it's sorcery, then it'll work out either way... Zagan clenched his fist, and Bifrons stuck up an index finger as if anticipating his actions.

"Oh no, it's better for you to stop right there, Zagan. Do you think you can break just my barrier in a space riddled with sorcery? Everyone will tumble headfirst into the water if you try!"

"Tch..."

Bifrons' barrier was repulsive and took on a shape that enveloped all sorcery invoked within it. It would perhaps have been correct to call it parasitic. As long as someone was using sorcery, the barrier wouldn't be undone. And if Zagan destroyed it, then all the sorcery captured by it would also be broken.

And then, the sludge on the lake spread out.

"That damn madman..."

The one who spoke with such contempt was Gremory. Kimaris was also right next to her. If it was them, then they would likely be able to break through the Archdemon's barrier, but...

At that moment, a high-pitched scream resounded through the air.

"Eeek, somebody... Someboody!"

As the sludge crept across the deck, there was one person who was left behind.

"That woman is..." Nephy grew pale.

The one who was left behind was the musical troupe's siren. It seemed she was not a sorcerer or anything. And it also appeared that the skeletons who made up the musical troupe were either already eaten or had tumbled into the lake. All that was left were instruments pitifully scattered about.

Without any method of fluttering in the air, the lake had already transformed into the territory of the sludge. And, as if toying with the girl who had no place to run, the sludge crept about in her surroundings.

"Nephy, can you fly?"

"...Y-Yes!" Nephy had learned the basics of sorcery. She couldn't freely soar through the skies, but she was at least able to float in place. And so, after entrusting Chastille to her, Zagan descended to the deck.

A shrill scream rang out.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"...Shut it. If you're a singer, then sing a song or something..."

Zagan grabbed onto the nape of the siren girl's neck and swung his fist into the deck. He piled his own mana into the strike in addition to the mana he gained by devouring Bifrons' sorcery earlier. When it came to simple destructive power, it was unlikely that even all the sorcerers present couldn't top it with their combined might. It was a hammer-like strike that could transform a small village into a crater. Forget the deck, the ship itself was smashed in half, and the shockwave blew away the sludge, as well.

Even if it can absorb sorcery, it probably can't eat a physical shockwave. Zagan was able to repel the sludge, just as planned.

"Tch—" Zagan sharply clicked his tongue. A fragment of the sludge had affixed itself to the fist Zagan pounded into the deck. Even when he tried to shake or wipe it off, it continued to suck up Zagan's mana and began expanding.

Is it planning on taking in the Sigil of the Archdemon?!

If this was a remnant of the Demon Lord, then it was only natural that it was drawn to the Sigil of the Archdemon, which was an even larger remnant. And it wasn't stopping at only his fist, as the sludge even began creeping up Zagan's arm.

"My liege!" Raphael jumped in behind him as Zagan grunted. Then, he put his artificial arm to his right hand.

"Heed my call — Sacred Sword Metatron!" Raphael called out to his Sacred Sword as he pulled it from his artificial arm. There was no way an Archdemon's evening ball would remain peaceful, and they all knew it. That was why Zagan remodeled Raphael's artificial arm into a sheath that could store his Sacred Sword. In principle, it was the same kind of sorcery that Barbatos used to jump over space.

The Sacred Sword was already wrapped in the flames of purification, and the flames burned the sludge along with Zagan's arm.

"Ghhh..." Zagan let out a groan from the pain. Even so, he was able to remove the sludge coiling around his arm. Unfortunately, he was left with severe burns in its stead. And while protecting Zagan's back, Raphael barked out an apology.

"Forgive my insolence!"

"No, it's fine. You saved me."

Honestly, the situation was quite dangerous. If not for this loyal butler burning him, Zagan would likely have had to amputate his right hand or something. It was good fortune to have it end with mere burns.

However, it may have been a mistake to reveal the Sacred Sword. The sorcerers who escaped into the air began raising suspicious voices.

"Hey, ain't that a Sacred Sword?"

"Why can an Apparition use a Sacred Sword?"

“Is he just a spy from the church, or what?”

The one who suggested that was Archdemon Bifrons. If an Archdemon was in possession of a Sacred Sword, then it was only natural to suspect they were involved with the church. There was likely no longer any meaning to keeping up the Valefor disguise, so Raphael proceeded to remove his helmet. And upon witnessing his exposed face, the sorcerers all turned pale.

“It’s the sorcerer hunter, Raphael! He’s fucking alive?!”

As the sorcerers raised their voices in bewilderment, Raphael howled back at them.

“I have cast aside that name. Now I am merely Archdemon Zagan’s sword.”

Exactly how far did Raphael’s voice reach? For the time being, he didn’t have enough hostility pointed at him, so he was sure he wouldn’t get attacked from behind, but they likely didn’t trust him, either. The sorcerers all shrank back, as if exclaiming that they wanted nothing to do with him. Zagan could tell that they would not cooperate with him, regardless of the situation.

Well, it’s good that they’re not hostile, I suppose.

This was likely the result of his efforts to make them fear Archdemons. He was thankful that his enemies wouldn’t multiply any further. Incidentally, the young siren had carelessly lost consciousness.

This baggage is in the way...

Also, even though he had blown it away, it wasn’t like the sludge had vanished. Instead, it was once more seeping along the hull of the ship, closing in on Zagan.

“Raphael, burn the sludge to ashes.”

“As you wish.”

Challenging this sludge with his fists was a poor plan. Even if Zagan blew it away with the shockwave, just touching a mere drop of it could cause huge problems. Raphael’s Sacred Sword had a better matchup.

At Zagan’s command, Raphael unleashed the flames of purification. And the sludge, which wasn’t broken even by the shockwave of Zagan’s fist, burned into nothingness in the blink of an eye. However, the portion of the sludge next to what was burned away grew in mass.

Even if he can hold it back, it’s impossible to exterminate it completely...

If all twelve Sacred Swords were gathered, it may have been possible to do something about it, but there was too much for Raphael to repel all on his own.

Zagan was being gradually cornered atop the sinking ship. And after laying the siren girl down on the deck, Zagan wove sorcery into

his fist.

Heaven's Phosphor should work on this thing, but... The sheer volume of the sludge had already surpassed that of the ship. Moreover, that sorcery was still incomplete. So then, what amount of power could Zagan put to use?

And just as he was planning to strike... a clear singing voice rang out.

“[Thou art the one who shines like the stars. The one who embraces balance, and arbitrates over good and evil.]”

It was similar to Nephy's voice... *But, that's not Nephy.*

Taken aback by that, Zagan looked up at the sky and spotted Nephteros singing. Her voice was clear and fluid. It was like she was someone entirely different from the person who was pointing hostility toward Nephy earlier. In fact, her figure even seemed sublime.

Yes, it was a song. It was not a ritual to bring forth sorcery or anything else like it. To a regular person, it was like a sort of prayer, a song of prayer. They were words that had an evidently different structure to those used for sorcery.

And that song began to weave together a great power that was not even outdone by the mana of the sludge.

With each verse she wove, lights like fireflies overflowed and wrapped around her body in a boisterous dance. And that light appeared like stardust over the veil of darkness.

“[Be that as it may, balance is broken. Order is lost, and the earth is dyed in blood. Thus, this merits retribution. Retribution brought forth by the hammer that shatters all sin.]”

The stardust-like light changed directions and began plunging toward the sludge. The sludge that wouldn't break apart from fire, lightning, or even Zagan's fist was now vanishing as if dissolving. It was similar in a way to Raphael's flame of purification, but its power surpassed his by a long shot.

But what's this echo that sounds like grief...? Even though such a terrifying amount of power was being woven together, simply listening to the song itself made Zagan's chest squeeze, as if he was overcome by the sad melody. And then he realized the truth...

Are... Nephteros' emotions being conveyed through the song? He had nothing to base his theory on. However, for some reason, as he listened to that singing voice, he recalled the image of Nephy's profile when he had hurt her.

“No... She's not Nephy.”

It was Nephy back when she was still being oppressed, as well as the figure of the girl who felt pain in her chest while looking at her. Even though she wanted to save her, she also ended up losing her place in the world because of that same girl. The memories of that

pitiful girl were being conveyed by her song.

Why are these memories flowing into me...? As he looked around, Raphael shook his head right next to him with a bewildered expression on his face. It seemed the memories weren't just flowing into Zagan, but everyone listening to the song. And perhaps not having realized that, Bifrons laughed. And Bifrons' hand was gripping onto a glass filled with wine that he got from god knows where.

"How's that? Don't you think it's beautiful? This is something that only high elves are capable of. It is the light of celestial mysticism, a power of the gods that can even destroy the Demon Lord."

Intoxicated by the results of their own research, Bifrons raised a toast in celebration. And then, even as that was going on, Nephteros' song approached its finale.

"[The lights of the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, it simply judges and brings forth destruction. This is the prayer of retribution] — Asteri Ekrixis!"

Particles of light overflowed from Nephteros' body, and just like a meteor shower, they all rained incessantly on the sludge. It was a light of destruction that pierced into the sludge and burned it from within.

"This is... celestial mysticism..."

This was what Bifrons spent three hundred years resurrecting, a power of the gods that had been granted to high elf Nephteros. The light of the burning stars converged on the sludge and swelled in size.

Is it going to explode? If so much mana was converted into a destructive force, then even the entire lake could have been blown away.

"Tch, we're backing off, Raphael!" Zagan carried Raphael and the siren girl and escaped to the skies, then put himself on guard in a way to protect Nephy and the others. However, the destruction that Zagan was expecting did not occur.

"Huh...?"

Who was it that let out that voice? The light that had been swelling up... suddenly vanished. And with a drip and a drop, red droplets ran down her face.

"Wh-Why...?"

The red droplets trailed down Nephteros' body and fell off her. Her dark skin was dyed crimson, and they flowed down like tears from her mouth and eyes. The sight was shocking, but the one who looked most confused was Nephteros herself.

"Blood...?"

Zagan realized what it was too late, as Nephteros plummeted down with the moon at her back. At that moment, he felt like he could see both bewilderment and despair in the girl's golden eyes.

“Ah...”

Nephy squeaked, stretching out her hands in a feeble attempt to catch her. However, her hands just couldn't reach.

The girl slammed against the sinking ship with a heavy thump. And gradually, a red stain spread out on the slanted deck. Since the curtain had fallen all too suddenly, Bifrons let out a resigned sigh.

“Shame, looks like there was too much mana, and it couldn't settle in her body...” Bifrons' voice possessed no hint of sympathy or pity for Nephteros. Even so, Nephteros was still alive. While her silver hair was being dyed red, she earnestly raised her face.

“Ma...ster... Bi...frons...” Nephteros stretched out her hand toward her master, imploring him for help, but Bifrons simply shook their head as if she didn't even enter the Archdemon's field of vision.

“I went through so much trouble to drill that into you, too... Another failure, huh?”

“Gh!” Nephteros' face twisted in despair as she heard that. And then, the sludge that had been broken apart began to squirm toward her.

“Hey! She'll get eaten!”

“Whatever happens, happens. If we get any closer to it, then it may devour our Sigils of the Archdemon this time around, and if that happens, even the Archdemons won't be able to handle it.”

She'd been abandoned. As Bifrons made that choice, Nephteros wailed.

“No... way... Master... Bi...frons... Ah... Aaaaaaah!” Nephteros' body had been swallowed up to the waist by the sludge. At that, Bifrons let out a sigh, as if the sight bored him.

“Look, if so much of her's been swallowed, then it's already useless. Even the flames of the Sacred Sword can't burn the sludge. Well, I guess the biggest harvest today was grasping the true strength of the Sacred Sword, huh? Ahahah.”

Zagan groaned. He finally understood. He was wondering what amusement could come of hosting something like an evening ball, but Bifrons carried it out with a specific goal in mind. The choice of locale, inviting Zagan, having Nephy and Chastille accompany him... They were all necessary to test the power of this Demon Lord and celestial mysticism. And, as if it were somebody else's problem entirely, Bifrons smiled down at Nephteros.

“See ya, Nephteros. You were nothing but a failure, but I'm not disappointed, you know? After all, research is built on an mountain of failures. Next time, I'll do it better, okay?”

At that moment, Zagan saw the kind of face one made when they were truly thrown into the depths of despair. Those that knew naught of hope could not know of despair. When Zagan first met Nephy, she

had no hope. That was likely why despair never accompanied her.

All light had vanished from Nephteros' eyes, and then even those eyes were swallowed by the sludge. And with a squish, all that was left was the sound of something being crushed. After ascertaining that, Bifrons turned over to face Zagan.

"Now then, it's about time I head home. Oh yeah, that sludge over there is something like a ghost that only reacts to the mana of the sigil, so even if you don't pay it any mind, it should vanish on its own by the morning."

After one-sidedly passing that on, Bifrons' figure turned into dust and began to vanish. Bifrons seemed to be using sorcery to teleport away.

Watching that, the other sorcerers also tried to run away, but Bifrons' barrier had yet to be undone. So, they were once again pushed back.

"D-Don't screw with us, Archdemon! Undo your barrier! Let us go!"

"Aaah, is the memory of a failure something that goes away, I wonder? It would wound me if I were called a failure of an Archdemon, and I also want to provide poor Nephteros some company. Ahahahaaa."

Bifrons said that the sludge would vanish by the morning, but were there any sorcerers that could even survive until then? As he watched the actions of such a repulsive Archdemon, Zagan felt his blood run cold. And then, he quietly muttered something.

"...I don't like it."

"Don't like what? This seems unlikely, but you're not going to say something cliché, like that you can't forgive me for not saving that failure, are you?"

Bifrons' guess was on the nose. Though, sorcerers were purely evil creatures with no sense of compassion, so Zagan's feelings were an oddity. But even so, Zagan continued to show his contempt.

"I'll definitely... slug you!" Zagan proclaimed. That made Bifrons blink with a blank look on their face before bursting into laughter.

"Ahahaaa, that's good! I'll look forward to you coming to slug me. Well, if you survive and get out of here, anyway."

Bifrons' figure vanished away into thin air with that grating laugh. And then, all that was left was a deadly situation with no hope of escape in sight.



The sludge that swallowed Nephteros began to change shape.

It's taking on the form of a person...? It replicated the shape of a woman, seemingly having absorbed the girl's despair. And its ears

were tapered into a point like that of an elf. However, it was terrifyingly large. All that was sticking out of the water's surface was its upper body, but it had such a large build that the wreckage of the ship looked like a toy compared to it.

"Master Zagan..." Nephy tightly clenched the hem of Zagan's robe as she took in the sight. Biting down on her lip, she appealed to him in a trembling voice, "I am well aware that it is unreasonable, but there is something I would like to ask of you."

"...What is it? Let's hear it."

"Could I ask you... to save that girl... to save Nephteros, I wonder?" Nephy responded, tears in her eyes.

"Nephy, didn't you go through something horrible because of that girl?" Zagan questioned as his brow shot up.

To begin with, it was questionable whether she was even alive. And if, for argument's sake, her ego was still intact, he wasn't sure he could pull her free. Above all else, though, sorcery didn't work on that sludge. Even though she should have understood all of that, Nephy continued to speak as she gripped her chest.

"That girl's song... was extremely beautiful. It was very clear... and fluid... If she could sing in such a voice, then perhaps that girl is someone pure-hearted?"

Just earlier, Zagan believed what flowed into them along with her song were Nephteros' memories. And Nephy surely saw the same thing, as well.

"Being turned into such a form after all that is... sad. She seems to be crying, too..." Nephy continued to speak awkwardly, as if wringing words out. "That girl... is the same as me. I was saved by you, so that girl couldn't do it. The one she couldn't save... was me. That's why..."

"That's enough. I get it!" Zagan said as he combed his hand through Nephy's hair.

However, even so, Zagan could only shake his head.

"I understand your feelings, Nephy, but I can't do anything about it on my own."

He was almost swallowed whole when he attacked it with his fist. Heaven's Phosphor could possibly work, but he had no way of knowing if it could burn something of that size in a single blow. Perhaps if he used the Sigil of the Archdemon, something could be done about it, but he had no idea what would happen if he used the sigil in front of a remnant of the Demon Lord.

In other words, nothing could be done about it with Zagan's power.

"My... apologies. I asked something unreasonable," Nephy said as her ears drooped.

"However..." Zagan continued speaking, cutting Nephy off from

saying anything more, and continued. "Raphael, your Sacred Sword should work to a certain extent, right?"

As he shifted his gaze over to him, Raphael, who was no longer wearing a helmet, loyally nodded back.

"I believe so. If my liege commands it, then I shall go."

"Mmm..." Zagan shifted his gaze over to Foll after that.

"Foll, can your breath burn that sludge?"

"...I can't tell without trying, but probably. It isn't sorcery, after all."

After that, Zagan looked over to Chastille.

"Chastille, is this not the perfect opportunity to put the sorcerers in your debt?"

"I-I don't need a reason to protect others! But my sword is..."

Chastille's expression clouded over as she clung to Nephys. Zagan then let out a snort with a 'hmph.'

"Barbatos. You followed along, right? The Sacred Sword better be safe."

"Huh...?" Chastille let out a bewildered voice as a gloomy face popped out of the 'shadow' formed by her dress.

"I told you, I'm not a damn handyman, you got that?"

"Eeek, you... Where do you think you're coming out from?!"

It was like he came out of the gaps in her dress. And Chastille turned bright red as she pinned down her skirt.

Wow, he came along just like I thought, huh? The man was not a sorcerer with enough manners to stay quiet upon being ignored by an Archdemon. And luckily, as Barbatos revealed himself, he was, in fact, carrying a Sacred Sword.

"Here."

"...H-How long have you been lurking in my dress?" Chastille was on the verge of fainting as she took hold of her Sacred Sword. Barbatos then looked over at her suspiciously before responding.



“Ain’t it obvious? I was there from the very beginning! Ah, don’t worry. I’ve got no interest in anyone younger than me, so... Ow!”

Reduced to tears, Chastille slapped Barbatos’ cheek.

“You bitch...”

“Shut it, Barbatos. That was your fault.”

Next, Zagan finally turned to face Nephy.

“Now then, Nephy. It looks like this lot will lend a hand. How about you? Are you really willing to fight for the sake of the one who hurt you?”

“Yes!” Nephy said, her azure eyes sparkling as she returned a clear nod.

Zagan handed the siren girl he had been carrying this whole time over to Nephy. He wouldn’t be able to fight while carrying such baggage.

After that, he turned over to Barbatos.

“Barbatos, I’ll leave the footholds for Raphael and the others to you.”

“Don’t fucking order me aro— Wait, what? You... Just now... what’d you say?”

“What...? Did I say something strange?”

“You’re leaving it... to me?” Barbatos muttered, his face painted with a look of disbelief.

“Who knows? Maybe you heard wrong?”

Zagan said, then looked down at the ‘Sludge Demon Lord’ prowling beneath him.

“Well then, shall we go exterminate a monster?”

And while he was at it, there was no harm in saving the pitiful captured princess.

I see. Being able to ‘rely’ on others may not be all that bad.

Chastille had said she wanted him to rely on her. And even if he didn’t know, Zagan was already relying on Nephy. Surely, that wasn’t a bad thing.

After all, Zagan would never have been able to gain such power on his own.



“Fuuuuuu—” Foll was the first to take action. After taking a deep breath, she deployed multiple layers of magic circles in front of her. Then, she unleashed her dragon’s breath. It became a blinding flash as it was amplified by sorcery and pierced through the Sludge Demon Lord. And because a massive hole had been drilled into its torso, the Sludge Demon Lord lost its posture and collapsed.

“...Phew, it worked.”

“Well done. Keep up the support just like that.” Zagan leaped down toward the lake after praising his daughter’s effort. And in that instant, a fragment of the sunken ship floated up at the tip of the Sludge Demon Lord’s nose. It seemed that it may have been the correct choice to destroy the boat with his fist. There were several other large fragments of wood floating about that looked usable as footholds.

Even if it’s a monster, I don’t really like punching something with Nephys’s face, huh? That was why he first tried his best not to look at that face.

“What did you eat to get so fat?” Zagan said as he let out a provocative laugh. He had already woven a magic circle in his right hand. The magic circle, which was woven of several thousand circuits, began sucking in not only Zagan’s mana, but even the mana around him and the Sludge Demon Lord’s as it grew brighter and brighter.

“Burn to ash — Heaven’s Phosphor!” Zagan could feel a dull sensation akin to plunging his hand into a bog. And just like with tar, the sludge stuck to his fist.

“A misfire?” One of the sorcerers who had escaped to the skies mumbled in observation.

“No, it worked.”

And immediately following that, a black flame erupted. Zagan slammed his fire-clad fist into the Sludge Demon Lord’s face and burned that fragment to ashes. Heaven’s Phosphor saw to it that it was instantly disintegrated, so the sludge did not stick to Zagan like it had before.

However, the destruction did not merely stop at its head. It made the sludge break apart halfway down its torso. Barbatos then opened his mouth, dumbfounded.

“...Wow, just how many circuits did you jam into that?”

Back when he showed it to Barbatos, Heaven’s Phosphor had about two thousand circuits in it. And just now, Zagan had packed double that number.

However, this still isn’t enough. The black flames, which burned the Sludge Demon Lord, gradually lost their vigor and were pushed back by the sludge. Its regeneration speed was faster than it had been when it was just sludge.

The sludge seemed to have been granted a role upon taking the form of a dark elf. Now that it moved with a goal in mind, it became much more efficient than when it was nothing but dirt spreading about aimlessly. However, while all that was happening, Zagan spotted something.

“Nephteros!”

The upper torso of the pitiful dark elf could be seen deep within

the sludge's chest. And as he called out her name, the girl's ears twitched.

She's still alive?

However, he only spotted her for a mere moment, as the sludge immediately swallowed her.

"Shit, this is bad, Zagan!" Barbatos yelled.

After recovering, the sludge pushed forward to swallow Zagan, as well.

"Shine — Sacred Sword Azrael!" Chastille yelled with her Sacred Sword still in its sheath, moving to protect Zagan. The light of purification poured out of the opening at the hilt.

"Hiyah!"

It appeared that she had brandished her sword in a single horizontal slash. However, what Zagan saw before his eyes was a countless number of sword slashes, like a fishnet. It looked like she only made a single strike, yet this girl unleashed slashes that numbered in the dozens in the blink of an eye. Seemed she was quite formidable even without her Anointed Armor.

So why is she such a useless crybaby normally? It was rather mysterious.

The sludge that had been closing in on Zagan was chunked into clean cross sections and crumbled into pieces. However, even though the power and speed of the attack was praiseworthy, its effect didn't extend to the same range as Raphael's strike. The sludge began to gather together and regenerate right away, but—

"Mow it down — Sacred Sword Metatron!" Raphael charged in right as it did. The pieces that were diced up by Chastille's light were burnt to a crisp by Raphael's flame. Unable to collect its pieces, the Sludge Demon Lord bent backward and distanced itself from the wreckage of the ship.

Gathering two of the Sacred Swords is quite effective, I see. The thought of facing them as an enemy sent a shudder down his spine, so he was lucky they were allies. Nevertheless, it didn't appear like the Sludge Demon Lord had taken any serious damage from that.

Despite being pummeled by an Archdemon, taking two attacks from Sacred Swords, and even being doused with a dragon's breath... its size had not changed at all. Plus, its regenerative powers showed no signs of slowing down. And for exactly that reason, Zagan let out a fearless laugh.

If I don't act arrogant in such a situation, then how exactly am I an Archdemon?

"Tear away the sludge! The elf inside is still alive!" Zagan raised his voice and yelled.

The first sorcerer it attacked was immediately consumed and had

vanished, but Nephteros was largely still intact. Was it because of the difference in the aggregate amount of mana she possessed, or perhaps high elves had some sort of resistance? Zagan wasn't sure, but if she was still alive, then it may have been possible to save her.

If Nephteros is cut loose, then the sludge should stop propagating. However, after obtaining the shape of Nephteros, it was only natural that the Sludge Demon Lord didn't stay passive. The mouth of the regenerated head opened wide.

"Something's coming!"

A breath attack? Or perhaps it was going to spit out flames? Or maybe it was even chanting a spell? Their vigilance should have been the perfect defense, but the attack was far outside their realm of expectations.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

It was... a scream.

"Gah, urgh?"

The Sludge Demon Lord unleashed a scream loud enough to split one's head. Violent waves broke out on the water's surface, the wreckage of the ship burst away into pieces, and the lanterns left floating on the water were smashed to bits and extinguished.

"Chastille!"

The Angelic Knight was standing there, covering Zagan. And she surely took on the brunt of the scream due to how worse for wear she looked. Partway through, she lost consciousness and collapsed.

"Tch, such a pain!" Barbatos, of all people, ended up catching Chastille as she collapsed. However, it seemed Chastille immediately regained consciousness, and she shook her head.

"I-I'm... al...right..."

"Nope, you're not fine at all."

Looking closely, one could easily spot blood dripping out of Chastille's ears. Her eardrums may have burst.

"Barbatos, take care of Chastille's treatment. Raphael, you can still go, right?"

"A foolish question!" Raphael roared. It seemed he got away with minor injuries due to his Anointed Armor. After giving a reliable nod, he held his Sacred Sword at the ready. And then, Zagan dashed in toward the Sludge Demon Lord once more with Raphael at his side.

"I'm... kinda bad at healing sorcery though, you know?"

Barbatos grumbled as he distanced himself from the front line and began treating Chastille.

The Sludge Demon Lord opened its mouth. It was surely planning to unleash a 'scream' again.

"I won't let you!" Foll shouted as her dragon's breath pierced through its cranium. However, Foll's strike did not possess the power

to burn away the sludge like a Sacred Sword or Heaven's Phosphor could. And so, the sludge that was scattered in the air changed directions and fell toward her.

"Erk!"

"Foll!" Zagan yelled as a black wind blew in front of the young dragon. And then...

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

As if to return the 'scream' in kind, a beast's roar broke out. The roar gave birth to a shockwave and blew away the spray of sludge.

"Grrrrrr..."

It was an enormous lion. That was not a metaphor, as it truly was a majestic beast that used four limbs to kick off the ground. And it was floating in midair, as if protecting Foll. The black lion then looked at Foll with its golden eyes.

"Are you alright, dear daughter of Sir Zagan?"

"...Kimaris?"

His voice was unmistakably that of Black Blade Kimaris. It seemed the lion was his original form. And atop the lion's back was a voluptuous woman bearing a large scythe. She had horns which resembled those of a goat sticking out of her magnificent blonde hair.



“Keeheehee, it seems sorcery doesn’t work, but what of this Balor’s Evil Eye of mine?”

The beauty’s eye shined with a creepy violet glow, and then suddenly, the Sludge Demon Lord’s exterior was dyed with ash.

“An evil eye which changes all in its gaze to ash?!”

Zagan had seen documents describing it before. It was an ability some fomorians possessed that was different from sorcery. It was similar to the breath of a dragon in that regard.

Foll then blinked in surprise.

“...Who?”

“Oh my, didn’t we greet each other moments ago? I’m Gremory.”

She touched Foll’s jaw with her finger as she formed a shady smile. Gremory had a youthful figure that no one would ever imagine, given her earlier appearance as an old woman. Still, there was no doubt this woman really was Enchantress Gremory.

“You two...” Zagan muttered in a befuddled voice, and Gremory scoffed back at him in turn.

“It seems... that lending you a hand is the best course of action, Zagan. So, we’ll be joining in on your little struggle here.”

The black lion then nodded in agreement with Gremory.

“It’s fine if we just pull that elven girl out, right? Though we may be lacking in ability, allow us to cooperate with you,” Gremory claimed. Then, with a ‘moreover,’ she brandished her large scythe in the air and continued. “Bifrons’ way of doing things pisses me off. I’d love to ruin his plans.”

At that point, the other sorcerers each began launching attacks against the Sludge Demon Lord. And while gazing at that scene, Barbatos finished with Chastille’s treatment.

“There... You should be hearing things again, right?”

Chastille looked up at his unhealthy face in shock, as contrary to her expectations, she’d actually been healed.

“Wh-Why... did you save me...?”

“Ain’t it obviously ‘cause I won’t get my reward if you kick the bucket?”

Those were likely his true feelings on the matter, but Chastille cast her eyes down, seemingly ashamed of herself.

“I may have... misunderstood you a little. I thought... you were a far more despicable man.”

“What? Ain’t every sorcerer like that?” Barbatos said, making a puzzled expression. However, Chastille shook her head as she got back onto her feet.

“I’ve recovered enough... Also, sorry for slapping you earlier.”

“...Huh?”

Leaving behind the dumbfounded Barbatos, Chastille dashed toward the Sludge Demon Lord. Almost everyone present was now fighting alongside and following Zagan.

However, this still isn't enough. Even if they were able to stop the Sludge Demon Lord's movements, they had no way of destroying it. They weren't even able to crush just the portion of the body that was sticking out of the water. They were still unsure of how to deal the fatal blow they needed.



Nephy was carrying the siren girl while waiting in a location behind the front line.

What... can I do...?

Zagan was trying to fulfill Nephy's wish to save Nephteros. However, he had also said that he couldn't save her on his own. And he asked whether she would fight with him. She knew she had to fight, for both Zagan and her own sake... Unfortunately, she had no idea what she could even do.

I can't use the sorcery that Master Zagan taught me... It was clear to Nephy that the sorcery being fired out by the other sorcerers was all being swallowed by that sludge. And since she was apparently a high elf, her mana capacity was large. If her sorcery was eaten, then it would only hold Zagan and the others back.

"Then... what exactly should I..." Nephy muttered those words as the siren girl began stirring in her arms. It seemed she had woken up.

"U-Um? Wh-What's going on?" Unable to grasp the situation, the siren's eyes began darting about.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Nephy inquired, which made the girl turn pale and start trembling violently.

"Eeek, I'm sorry, please forgive me! I'm just a singer, I don't know anything!"

Apparently, it looked like Nephy was angry. Nephy then tried touching her own cheek.

I see... Is my expression too stiff...? Nephy wondered. The people she had been blessed with meeting ever since encountering Zagan could all sense what Nephy was thinking or wanted to say. That was why she thought she could finally form a proper smile, but it seemed that was just her imagination. And though she was discouraged by that, Nephy still tried to protect the girl.

"Please hide behind me. It's not like you're safe yet."

"Eh...? Wait, huh, we're flying?"

There was a magic circle at Nephy's feet. At a glance, it looked like mere light with no substance, but it actually proved to be a useful foothold. If a flying carpet actually existed, then that was surely what

it would feel like. It was crude sorcery that couldn't be used to move about freely, but it was the foothold that Nephy wove together herself.

The siren girl timidly lowered her feet... or rather her fin, and circled around behind Nephy. And then, Nephy focused on the fight that was unfolding. As expected, the most powerful presence was Zagan's fist. A single strike from it blew away the Sludge Demon Lord's shoulder, which immediately regenerated. Raphael, Chastille, and all the other sorcerers were launching attacks, but none of them ever dealt a decisive blow.

It was possible that the Sludge Demon Lord's mana would eventually run dry and its regeneration would stop, but by that time, Nephteros would surely be long dead.

After watching the spectacle for a while, the siren girl audibly gulped.

"Eeek... Those people... are fighting, right? Can they win?"

"...They'll win. It's Master Zagan... so definitely."

The problem, though, was whether there was anything that Nephy could do. And, as if she couldn't stand just sitting by anymore, the siren girl raised her voice.

"Hang in theere! Hang in there, Mister Archdemooon! Ah, would it be better to sing? Ah, let's see... Go! Go! Arch-de-mon!"

"Shut it!" Zagan's angry roar came flying back at her, which made the siren girl lose her desire to help.

"How mean. Even though I was just trying to cheer him on..."

"Was it not because he found singing distracting...?"

"But... I'm a singer... All I can do is sing."

"Sing..." Nephy felt something click in her mind as she repeated that word.

That girl's song... possessed power. Celestial mysticism... It was an ancient power that Archdemon Bifrons resurrected. If that Archdemon was telling the truth, then it should have been possible for Nephy to use it, as well.

But... how? If it was as simple as imitating the song, then Nephteros would not have collapsed. There also would have been no need for Bifrons to spend several hundred years researching it.

The siren girl timidly looked up at Nephy, concerned by her silence.

"Um... did I... say something bad just now?"

"No... Um, how does one... sing a song? That's what I was wondering."

There was no way this girl would be able to tell her how to use celestial mysticism. However, upon hearing Nephy's murmur, the siren girl let out a crisp laugh.

"That's it? It's simple."

“Huh...?”

“Setting aside the technical aspect, what’s important in the end is your feelings. Be it your desires, your aspirations, or whatever else. In any case, you need to pour your feelings into your song to reach the hearts of others... Basically, what I’m saying is that no matter how good you sound, you’ll always be second-rate if you can’t put your heart into it,” the siren girl said, then gripped Nephy’s hand and continued. “He got mad at me earlier, but let’s sing together and cheer him on! Heeere we go! Go! Go! Arch-de-mon!”

It was clear that the girl spoke without thinking too deeply about it. However, Nephy found her answer in those words.

Put my... heart into it... As she mulled over those words, the image of Nephteros using up all her power and falling from the sky came to mind.

She looked sad. She looked vexed. And above all else, it appeared that she was holding out hope for someone to save her.

She looked like... Master Zagan when I first met him... Or perhaps it was more apt to say she looked like Nephy herself. That was why Nephy couldn’t leave her be. Regardless of the cost, she wanted to help her. She wanted to save her. And as she prayed for that outcome, words began to naturally flow from her mouth.

“[Thou art the one who shines like the stars. The one who embraces balance, and arbitrates over good and evil.]” Nephy’s body was wrapped in the light of stardust as she floated in the air with the moon at her back.



“Tch, we can’t break through!” Raphael swung his Sacred Sword down as he let out that roar. It wasn’t like he could fire off the flame of purification indefinitely. The strength of the flame was gradually weakening, so he was starting to get pushed back by the sludge.

Chastille, who wasn’t a sorcerer and was using nothing but her flesh and blood to fight, looked by far the most exhausted, however.

“Chastille, back off already!”

“If I fall back, then who will protect your back...? Ack!”

Chastille’s foothold crumbled under her as she let out that noble declaration. They were fighting on the wreckage of the ship, but before they knew it, the sludge had encroached on those footholds.

“Horse Head!” Foll shouted as she swooped Chastille up into the air, but the sludge stretched up like a tentacle and attacked them.

“Foll!”

And at that exact moment...

“[Thou art the one who shines like the stars. The one who embraces balance, and arbitrates over good and evil.]”

Stardust fell from the sky and pierced through the sludge tentacle.
Celestial mysticism?

It was the mysticism that Nephteros used. However, she was swallowed by the sludge. In that case, the one singing had to be...

“Nephy.”

That pure girl was singing, illuminated by the shining moon behind her. Her voice was clear, and upon hearing it, Zagan felt like he was finally convinced of her connection to Nephteros.

I see... Nephy and Nephteros may actually resemble each other. He wasn't talking about their physical appearance. For you see, her voice resounded earnestly in his heart, carrying the same melody as her dark counterpart. Plus, the starlight Nephy created could even tear apart the Sludge Demon Lord.

All the pieces... are in place. He was convinced that they could break through now.

“Chastille, Raphael, open a path!” Zagan yelled and leaped toward their foe. In response, the Sludge Demon Lord stretched out both its arms in an attempt to crush him.

“Shine — Sacred Sword Azrael!”

“Heed my call — Sacred Sword Metatron!”

The two Archangels flanked both of Zagan's sides as he charged in and pulverized the Sludge Demon Lord's arms. Even so, it opened its mouth to try and unleash yet another scream.

“That's useless.”

“Keeheehee, fall to ruin... Balor's Evil Eye!”

Foll fired out her dragon's breath, and Gremory matched her evil eye with it. The Sludge Demon Lord's cranium crumbled to pieces, and the dark elf girl captured deep within was suddenly revealed. However, the sludge's regeneration was still far too fast.

Kicking off footholds made of magic circles, Zagan zoomed through the air, but by the time his fist came into range, it had regenerated completely.

“Please get on!”

Zagan was carried away as he landed on a bed of soft fur.

“Kimaris?”

“We're breaking through!”

I see... This is certainly Black Blade.

The black lion pierced through the air like a gust of wind. He trampled down all before him, flying straight toward the enemy like a loose arrow. None could stop that figure, and he took on an appearance akin to that of a blade.

“[Be that as it may, balance is broken. Order is lost, and the earth is dyed in blood. While in grief, thou shalt throw thyself into the skies.]”

And just then, Nephy's stardust came pouring down. When that happened, parts of the Sludge Demon Lord crumbled, and the part that was covering Nephteros' body was torn away.

Since only her lower body was stuck in place, it seemed the girl's body was exposed enough that it could be pulled free with just a little more effort. In other words, the path was completely open. And so, Zagan clenched his right fist.

"Burn to ash — Heaven's Phosphor!"

A black flame burst out from his hand as he brought his fist down on the Sludge Demon Lord. Nephteros was buried right at the center of it, so the sludge stretched open as if being split apart as the black flame skillfully avoided her body.

"Ah...?" Nephteros' ears quivered with a twitch, and her golden eyes opened.

"Come!" Zagan said as he stretched out his hand, but...

"Sir Zagan, not yet!" Kimaris proclaimed as he bit the collar of Zagan's robe and pulled him back. Immediately following that, sludge gushed out of Nephteros' body.

You're telling me her body has become a vessel for the sludge?! He should have realized just from the fact that the sludge took on Nephteros' appearance, but he clearly wasn't thinking logically. Luckily, thanks to Kimaris, Zagan still managed to escape the sludge assault, but the girl's body was getting buried in sludge yet again.

Pitch black tears began falling from Nephteros' eyes, and the sludge had even encroached on those small droplets.

"Uh... Ah... Saaave... meee... Sa...ve..." Nephteros let out a sorrowful voice. Even in such a situation, it appeared her ego was still intact.

Kimaris then muttered in a grave voice.

"Sir Zagan, though I feel sorry for her, that girl is already..."

It would have been possible if she was just being overwhelmed from the outside, but he knew of no way to expel everything inside her.

But, if this was Nephy, could I abandon her?

The answer was obviously no. He would surely use whatever was necessary of his body, soul, wisdom, and magical power to save her. This girl was not Nephy. She wasn't Nephy, but she was similar to her, and she was a girl who wholeheartedly wished to save Nephy. And that was why he couldn't simply abandon her.

"Kimaris. You've done enough. Feel free to run away now."

"Eh...?"

"A man who can't even answer the wish of his bride... isn't fit to call himself an Archdemon!" Zagan claimed as he plunged in toward the Sludge Demon Lord and clenched his fist.

“One more time — Heaven’s Phosphor!”

Black flame burst out and tore away the sludge surrounding the girl’s body. He had gotten just as far earlier, so he was in the same predicament, unable stop the sludge from pouring out of Nephteros’ body.

“It’s no good. It’s the same as...” Kimaris muttered in grief. But Zagan merely clenched his left fist in response.

“Pierce through — Heaven’s Phosphor!” Zagan’s plan involved a twofold attack using Heaven’s Phosphor. His left fist struck his intended target, mercilessly piercing through Nephteros’ chest.

Someone gulped down and let out an ‘eek’ at the sight.

“Hak...” Nephteros’ golden eyes shot wide open, and she spat out what looked like black blood from her mouth. Zagan’s hand was sticking out through her back, gripping what looked to be a black lump of meat. The lump was pulsating as if it were alive, and even looked akin to a heart.

So this... is its true body? Feelers stretched out of the lump of meat like veins and began creeping up Zagan’s arm.

“How stubborn...” Zagan cursed it out as the black lump of meat turned to ash and crumbled away. And then, as if she was a puppet who had its strings cut, Nephteros lost all power in her body. Despite that, however, the sludge beneath him didn’t vanish.

Having lost Nephteros, it was no longer able to maintain the shape of a person and was spreading across the lake like dirty mud. If it was left as it was, then by dawn, it would surely swallow the nearby harbor. However, Zagan was no longer paying it any mind.

“[The lights of the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, no fear, and no suffering. This is the prayer of forgiveness] — Astraea Ekrixis!”

The light of celestial mysticism that Nephy wove together drowned the repulsive sludge. There were no violent explosions or anything of the sort. Instead, a pillar of light rose to the sky as it burned the putrid filth.

After the light settled down, all that was left was the calm lake beneath them. And with that, the remnants of the Demon Lord that Archdemon Bifrons had awoken vanished for good.



Epilogue

Half an hour later, Bifrons' luxurious passenger boat was once more floating atop the lake. Since they needed to treat the injured, the sorcerers had restored it to create a secure foothold.

"How regrettable..."

Raphael let out a groan as Zagan laid Nephteros down on the deck. After being swallowed by the sludge, burned by Zagan's Heaven's Phosphor, and left without a single shred of clothing, she was now wrapped up in Zagan's robe. Taking in the sight, Raphael narrowed his villainous eyes in sorrow.

"Can this sword of mine not even save a single girl?"

Zagan cocked his head to the side. It seemed Raphael was misunderstanding things. And just then, Kimaris, who returned to human form, hung his head in disappointment.

"In that situation, there was nothing that could be done. If Sir Zagan did not do as he did, eventually, the rest of us would have used up all of our strength."

As Kimaris pinched the corners of his eyes, Gremory slapped his shoulder with a thud.

"Endure it, Kimaris. The man for whom this should be most painful is already doing so..." Gremory said as she pointed a gaze full of compassion toward Zagan.

This woman... She's able to make that kind of face too, huh? It was unexpected, but Zagan felt like the conversation was gradually moving in a strange direction.

"Look, guys..." Zagan opened his mouth to clarify the situation, but shut it quickly as Nephy quietly moved close to him.

"Master Zagan, thank you very much," Nephy said as she knelt down next to Nephteros. And then, she used a wet handkerchief to wipe her face, which had been caked in dirt and ash.

"Regardless of the outcome, I believe this girl was saved in the end. She was able to properly meet her end as a person instead of a monster, after all."

Chastille began sobbing, as if unable to endure it anymore as she heard those words.

"This is... far too cruel. Does Bifrons... not have a heart? Even that Archdemon was once a human!" Chastille grieved.

"What kinda optimistic crap are you spouting? Ain't sorcerers just

such things? On that point, Zagan, you understood full fucking well. When it came to it, you didn't hesitate at all." Barbatos let out a sudden laugh, though it still seemed to be accompanied by a light snuffle.

"...Handyman, you crying?" Foll asked, looking up at his face as if sympathizing with his sorrow.

"Th-There's no way I'm crying, got it?!"

"I'm also... sad. She was a really bad elf... so why...?"

Zagan didn't know what to do as he saw his beloved daughter moved to tears. Nephteros was the trusted retainer of the high-handed, devious Bifrons. If such a girl was injured, then who would complain? That thought process made the most sense, but everybody was still lost in grief. Even though a vast majority of those gathered were cold-blooded sorcerers.

That's a result of her song, huh? The song of celestial mysticism that Nephteros sang. For some reason, listening to her singing felt like a sorrowful reverberation. And that had been conveyed to the hearts of the sorcerers. Even so, Zagan cleared his throat with a cough and attempted to speak up.

"H-Hey, guys..."

However, Chastille shook her head, as if cutting him off.

"It's fine, Zagan. You're trying to put on a brave front, right? But it's fine for you to be sad, too."

"No, that's not what I mean..." Zagan hesitated to speak as the atmosphere gradually turned more heavy. Eventually, he heard an irritating voice that couldn't read the room.

"...Shut up. What's with all the noise?" Nephteros opened her golden eyes, spat those words out, and got up.

"Huh...?" And everyone other than Zagan opened their eyes wide in shock and let out confused yelps.

"Sh-She's... alive?" Nephy muttered.

"What about the wound? Wasn't she punched straight through the heart?"

"Heart...? Hyaaa?" Nephteros looked down at her own chest as she heard Raphael's words and let out a shrill cry. She was stark naked. And when she got up, the robe Zagan covered her with had completely opened up. Nephteros pulled in the robe in a panic and covered herself once more. Startlingly, there wasn't a single wound to find anywhere on her body.

"...Th-Thank goodness!"

"Oof! L-Let me go! I don't have any desire to be embraced by the likes of you!" Nephteros' dark skin flushed red as Nephy embraced her.

"Just what did you do, my liege?" Raphael questioned, his eyes

widening in surprise.

"I burned just the sludge. That's it," Zagan replied, making his actions seem like a bother.

"No, I mean, your arm penetrated her, right?"

"...Even I know basic healing sorcery..." Zagan's entire arm pierced through Nephteros' body, but in that instant, he began to apply healing sorcery to the wound in order to mend the damage. He had intentionally avoided as many of her internal organs and nerves as he could, so it should have only felt like her breath and blood flow stopped for only an instant. Of course, he was unable to extinguish the pain, so Nephteros had lost consciousness.

There's also the fact that if anything were to happen to Nephy or Foll and I wasn't able to use healing sorcery, then I wouldn't be able to save them. He never thought he would use the sorcery he learned for that purpose on an enemy, though.

"But, is it even possible to burn just the sludge while avoiding her body altogether?" Kimaris asked, clearly in disbelief.

"Huh...? If I can't do at least that much, then the traps in my castle would trigger against my family, right?" Zagan replied like it was perfectly natural, leaving Kimaris and Gremory at a complete loss for words.

"This guy... Contrary to his appearance, it seems his specialty is in delicate sorcery," Barbatos said as he shook his head in exasperation.

"Would you really consider that delicate work...?"

After that, Nephteros pushed aside Nephy and tried to stand up. However, she likely still didn't have much strength in her body. All she could do was writhe on the deck of the ship.

"So? What do you plan to do from here on out? I don't think you have any obligation to return to Bifrons' service," Zagan stated, then coldly stared at her face.

"I..." Nephteros murmured as she cast her gaze downward. And while she remained in place, unable to provide a proper answer, Nephy held out her hand to her.

"If it is alright with you, why not come with me?"

Nephteros opened her eyes wide. And then, as if scared of touching Nephy's hand, she timidly stretched out her clasped hand. However, right when she was on the verge of coming into contact with Nephy's hand, Nephteros shook her head.

"My only master... is Bifrons. I have... no intention of getting along with bastards like you!"

Even though she had the same face as Nephy, she remained a girl of little charm until the very end.

Well, that in itself is convenient for me... Zagan thought as he shrugged his shoulders. Then, he wrapped his arm around Nephteros'

armpit to help her stand.

“Do as you like. However, you’ll return that robe to me later, got it?”

As one would expect, he wasn’t about to tear it off her this instant, but he would be troubled if she just threw it away. After he informed her of his decision, Nephteros’ face suddenly turned red. But she eventually did nod back to him.

“Later, then. Give your master my regards. Tell him you’re my form of thanks to him.”

“Huh...? Well, okay. Understood,” Nephteros agreed and nodded, though she was clearly confused by the hidden meaning behind those words. And then, she silently departed into the night sky.

“...She left, didn’t she?”

“Is she still on your mind, Neph?”

“That’s... Yes, she is.”

She was a girl with the same face as her, and was also of the same race. Even though they managed to save her life, in the end, they never learned a single thing about Nephteros. Frankly, it would have been far stranger not to be concerned about her.

“Well, as long as she’s alive, I’m sure we’ll meet again. Just speak from the heart when that happens,” Zagan responded as he lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“...Ah, yes.”

Zagan could tell that the sorcerers behind them began moving all at once while they were talking. As he turned around, wondering what was going on, all of the sorcerers aboard the ship suddenly knelt down before him.

Due to the battle with the Sludge Demon Lord, where some fled and some lost their lives, only about half of the initial evening ball guests remained. Still, there were a few dozen of them. And, as if representing all those sorcerers, Gremory opened her mouth to speak.

“Archdemon Zagan. We shall follow you. We shall abide by your commands, and exhaust ourselves for your sake. That is the compensation we shall provide to the one who saved our lives.”

“What... are you all planning?” Zagan asked, staring on at them in wonder.

They certainly did join forces just now, but the simple fact that he kept Raphael and Chastille close by should have made most of them turn against him. Having them do the exact opposite was wholly unexpected. Their actions left Zagan bewildered by that, at which point Kimaris stepped in.

“In general, we consider Archdemons to be individuals like Sir Bifrons. We do not wish to antagonize them, but we also do not wish to get involved with them because they are such heartless beings.

However, it appears that you are different,” Kimaris asserted as his face formed a smile. Then, he continued, “If we are to serve an Archdemon, then we would much prefer one who does not abandon us in our time of need.”

“Seems my troubles have increased, huh?” Zagan said as he let out a sigh. However, the situation clearly was not entirely unpleasant to him.

“Uhhh, well, seems like we’ve got plenty worth celebrating, so I’ll sing you a song!”

Having tenaciously survived the ordeal, the siren girl began singing. Perhaps she was burning with competitive spirit after hearing Nephy’s song, as she sounded completely different. Unlike the noisy voice that she was using during the evening ball, her voice was now calm and serene. And upon hearing it, Nephy let out a deep sigh.

“A song... is a beautiful thing, isn’t it?”

No, your song is the most beautiful, I swear. Even though Zagan desperately wished to tell her that, he was unable to actually utter the words. And so, left with no other options due to the lump in his throat, Zagan held his hand out to Nephy.

“Nephy, shall we dance?”

Nephy stared back in surprise, but she then nodded as her pointy ears quivered.

“Yes!”

And under the moonlight, atop a ship full of sorcerers, the two of them danced an awkward dance.



Bifrons’ castle.

Nephteros was walking down a gloomy corridor where it was hard for her to even see where she was stepping.

If it is alright with you, why not come with me? She was unable to rid the image of that girl’s face as she accepted her.

“...Aren’t you just an idiot?” Nephteros detested that girl. She planned to trample all she had underfoot.

And yet, why was I the one being saved...? Nephteros honestly wanted to squeeze the hand that had been extended to her. And when that thought came to mind, she shook her head in a fluster.

I am... a high elf in service to Master Bifrons. There was no way she could do something like betray her master. Moreover, if that girl didn’t exist, then Bifrons would have never abandoned her.

And suddenly, Nephteros stopped walking upon realizing her predicament. *I see... I was... abandoned... wasn’t I...?*

So the question was, would Bifrons really just accept her with open arms? If she still had some use, then it was likely. However, as

she was now, she couldn't even demonstrate that much value.

As she was mulling over such depressing thoughts, Nephteros' feet suddenly became heavy. And then...

"Heeeh, I didn't really think you would come back!"

A familiar voice rang out, one that she wanted to hear, and didn't want to hear the most.

"Master Bifrons..."

The sorcerer let out a laugh in a singsong voice that couldn't be identified as either male or female. Yes, even Nephteros didn't know the gender of this Archdemon.

After a brief pause, Bifrons stared fixedly at Nephteros' body.

"Hm, interesting. You should've suffered from the Demon Lord's encroachment, but you've returned without a single wound on you. Was this Zagan's doing? Or perhaps the power of that elf? Mmm, how remarkable. Ahaha."

To this sorcerer, Nephteros' feelings weren't worth taking into consideration at all. Bifrons seemed to completely forget that they had abandoned her as they slapped her shoulder repeatedly.

"Well, in any case, welcome back. Now then, let's continue the experiment."

"Master Bifrons..."

Nephteros called out Bifrons' name in a quiet yet powerful voice.

"What is it, Nephteros?"

"This incident... How much of it went according to your plans?"

Bifrons was surprised that Nephteros returned, but clearly held no interest in the fact that she was still alive. The fact that she failed at using celestial mysticism, and even the fact that Zagan and the others saved her, may have all been part of the plan from the start.

"Well, how much do you think? Ahahahaha!" Bifrons replied, letting out a creepy laugh in turn. The laugh didn't sound like that of a human at all to Nephteros. And, as she bit down on her lip and cast her gaze downward, Bifrons clapped their hands together as if they'd just remembered something.

"Now that I think of it, did he... Tell me, did Zagan say anything? He seemed awfully mad at me, you know?"

"...No," Nephteros replied, shaking her head, as she came to a sudden realization.

Now that I think of it, he did leave me a message. Nephteros opened her mouth to speak reluctantly as that thought came to mind.

"If I remember right... he told me to you give his regards, and that I am his form of thanks to you."

"Thanks...? Fufufu, and what exactly did he mean by that, I wonder? Since he returned my precious research material to me, I should be the one thanking him, right?"

And right then, Bifrons tilted his head to the side.

“Oh? Nephteros, what’s that you’ve got over there?”

“Huh?” Nephteros looked down at her waist and pulled a single piece of paper from the robe’s pocket.

Back then, he... Zagan likely put it in there when he was helping her stand.

“By thanks he meant that, huh...? It looks like it has some sort of sorcery cast on it. Nephteros, you open it,” Bifrons ordered as they took a single step back from her.

“...Huh?” Nephteros had been told to open it despite Bifrons knowing it was a trap and backing away to safety. Her urge to vomit rose considerably, but even so, she felt she had to obey her master. And so, Nephteros carefully pulled out the letter.

“This... looks like an invitation.”

It was the invitation Bifrons gave to Zagan for the evening ball. It was something that Nephteros herself left behind for Nephy, so there was no mistaking it. Even after opening it and taking a look, nothing particularly seemed to activate.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anything set up on it.”

“...Hmm. I’m not so sure. He’s quite the skilled sorcerer, so it may activate only if I touch it. Nephteros, can you spread it open and leave it there?”

Zagan certainly did save Nephteros’ life, but at the same time, she understood that he was the type who showed no mercy to his enemies. If he set up some kind of sorcery against Bifrons, then it was entirely possible it would also get Nephteros mixed up in it.

Having reached this point, her fear had filled her heart, and her hands were trembling with a clatter. Seeing that, Bifrons let out a laugh as if her behavior was strange.

“Come on, I can’t see it properly if you shake so much. Don’t be so scared and bring it on over.”

A feeling of irritation began budding up within Nephteros in response to Bifrons’ indifferent reaction.

Why do I have to go through all this...? In that moment, Nephteros truly wished for nothing more than to slap that repulsive smile off Bifrons’ face. And at that moment...

“Wha—”

With a splash, red liquid scattered about.

“Huh...?” Nephteros was unable to understand what had happened. Her master’s head suddenly went flying as if it ruptured. Nephteros then timidly looked down at the letter in her hands, and sticking out of it... was a fist filled with mana.

This arm... is Zagan’s? It was a temporary arm created with sorcery, but it seemed to have bashed Bifrons right in the face. And

after Bifrons' headless body fell face forward, it spasmed several times and eventually went limp.

She could tell that all life had left the body, and that realization made Nephteros sink to the floor with a thud. She never so much as thought that this dreadful Archdemon would die. After remaining like that for some amount of time, Bifrons' corpse spasmed once more.

"Fuheehee, ahahaa, AHAHAHAHAA!"

After letting loose a mad cackle, the headless corpse stood up. Then, a lump of meat bubbled up from its open wound, and the gender-neutral face restored itself perfectly.

"My my, that was surprising. I became a sorcerer three hundred years ago, but this is the first time I've been killed. Ahaha, so that's what 'death' is, huh? Unexpectedly, it's... How do I put it... It feels like pissing myself."

Archdemon Bifrons seemed to have learned nothing from 'dying' once.

"He actually went out of his way to slug me, huh? That's amazing. Those other geezers would never go this far! Ahahahaa, just how will I play with him next, I wonder? How fun!" Bifrons continued laughing as if the whole turn of events was enjoyable. And, after spinning on the spot as if dancing all on their own, Bifrons then turned to look at Nephteros, saying, "Of course, I plan on having you continue to help me out from now on. Fufu, you also wish to see that elf of Zagan's suffer, right?"

"Please... don't... screw with me."

"What's this? Are you angry? I'm sure that's what you want, though. Come now, you're not telling me you've grown attached to them just because they saved you once, are you?"

"...I'll hit you!" Nephteros replied coldly. However, that simply made Bifrons' face light up.

"Fufufu, you usually only say such things when you're scared. That kind of bluff sure is a cute part of you."

I want to hit him. The moment that thought crossed her mind, a fist flew out of the letter once more. And, just like last time, it blew away Bifrons' head, leaving only a collapsed corpse in the corridor.

"...Fuhaa? Wh-What? This sorcery... Are you...? No, is it reacting to your will?"

Bifrons let out a bewildered voice after reviving a second time. And, after staring at their reaction blankly, Nephteros looked down at the letter.

I see. So, this sorcery reacts whenever I get angry. It was a little different from being protected, but this seemed to be Zagan's form of 'thanks.' Zagan had most likely predicted that Bifrons would never touch the letter, so he knew Nephteros would open it. When it came

to pranks between Archdemons, it seemed that Zagan was a cut above.

“Fufufu...” Nephteros unintentionally let out a laugh, then said, “I see. I have received quite a nice gift. I’ll be sure to treat it with great care.”

From here on out, Bifrons would surely attempt to use her as a tool or a sacrificial pawn. *But now I can retaliate each time it happens.*

Bifrons wasn’t the kind of Archdemon who would ever learn their lessons, but the letter should have at least made them hesitate to annoy Nephteros. Thinking of it that way, it was a very good insurance policy.

“No, wait, hold on. Hey, Nephteros. That’s, um... Isn’t it fine to just dispose of that letter...?” Bifrons spoke in a flustered voice, which was highly unusual.

“Huh...? Why would I ever do that?” Nephteros said as she tilted her head to the side like she found the notion odd, which left Bifrons speechless. And seeing her master at such a loss made Nephteros raise her voice and laugh.

She never quite realized that was the first time she ever laughed out of pure joy. In that moment, she was truly happy.

Afterword

It's been a long time. I've come to bring you *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love your Elf Bride: Volume 3*. My name is Fuminori Teshima.

This time around, we have a family trip with a fellow Archdemon, Bifrons! We've got fancy dresses atop a luxurious passenger ship! Chastille in tears surrounded by sorcerers! Foll getting on Zagan's lap in a playful bid for affection! And also, we have the first appearance of Dark Nephy.

It's the family trip arc that sheds some light on Nephy's origins and the secrets of the Archdemons!

Anyways, the gears are starting to move little by little. This time around, everyone got dolled up in dresses, so I'm delighted the illustrations are gorgeous. Personally speaking, I find the sight of Zagan with his hair tied up neatly when he usually doesn't care exhilarating! Also, Nephy's dress really is just wonderful, simply splendid.

Speaking of Nephy, elf ears are cute, aren't they? But you can't really say you want to touch them just because they are, huh? And considering his personality, Zagan would never forcefully touch them... Still, how exactly would it feel to touch them, I wonder?

The portions with cartilage are probably firm, but the earlobe seems soft. Plus, an elf's ears are kind of like a cat's, so the muscles may be linked to the side of the head, which is how they twitch about. This time around, that was the topic I spent the most time seriously pondering.

I got quite a lot of space for the afterword this time, so I apologize for suddenly going on and on about such a crazy topic. And speaking of crazy, the manuscript for a book starts as a draft verified by the editorial department, and after amending it, I get proofreading notes back, then it gets printed into a sample and turned into a book. But this time around, after sending off the amendments, the proofreading notes came back right away, and the chief editor, K, said, "There's nothing to fix, really." That was the first time it went like that, so I didn't know whether to be happy or panic.

The family trip arc has a bit of a different atmosphere from normal, so I hope my dear readers enjoy it. Also, there's something delightful that I have to report. We've only just gotten through three

volumes of this new series, but it's been decided that we'll now be getting a manga adaptation! It's currently in the planning phase, so I'll keep you informed as things become more concrete. Everyone, please look forward to it!

As for my plans, my new series launches on October 14th. It's called, *I Married the Demon Lord's Daughter and Started Living in the Country, but It Seems We're Not Allowed to Be Happy!*

As you can guess from the title, the heroine wishes to be happy, but it's not in the cards. It'll be an easygoing fantasy rom-com like *Elf Bride*, so I hope it will suit your fancy.

Also, the novelization of *Desktop Army 3: The Evil Tower of Rapunzel* (tentative title) is planned for summer. This series was imagined as a trilogy, so this book will be the finale! Everything about it has been finalized, so keep your eyes peeled!

Now then, allow me to once again offer my thanks to everyone. To my chief editor, K, who always provides me with firm directions and advice. To the illustrator, COMTA, who provided especially gorgeous and wonderful illustrations yet again (Nephteros is really cute). To everyone who worked on the cover design, proofreading, publicity, and such. To my children, who helped out with cleaning the house and fending off bees. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hand.

Thank you very much!

August 2017: On a hot day when I'm waiting for the air conditioner

— Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Memories of the Collar

“It may be rude of me to ask, but isn’t that collar suffocating, Nephy?”

“Well, it was painful at first, but hasn’t hurt at all since the second time it was placed on me...” Nephy nodded at her good friend Chastille, seemingly explaining that it was no big deal.

Nephy’s collar was originally a slave collar. However, because Nephy had high value on the market, her collar was decorated like a beautiful ornament.

“How did removing it once change things, exactly?” Chastille questioned as she looked at her friend curiously.

“Master Zagan altered its shape so that the edges wouldn’t dig into my skin. Thanks to that, it no longer feels unpleasant.”

Back when they first met, Nephy had never thought Zagan would personally modify her collar, so his actions made it a treasure in her eyes.

“How... unexpected. How do I put it... I thought that man was quite a bit more inconsiderate than what you’re describing.”

“Master Zagan is simply poor at showing his emotions. I assure you, even his sorcery is incredibly delicate. Once I started learning sorcery, I came to fully realize the extraordinary heights he’d achieved.”

“Well, he is the youngest Archdemon in history.”

Incidentally, Chastille was one of the top ranking Angelic Knights of the church, who were in open hostilities with sorcerers. Meanwhile, Nephy was the disciple, maid, and family member of an Archdemon, a kind among sorcerers. Nevertheless, the two of them were good friends.

“In that case, if that man didn’t end up walking the path of a sorcerer, maybe he would’ve ended up as some sort of craftsman...” Chastille claimed as she nodded in an amused manner.

“I’m not so sure about that. Master Zagan loves reading, so I believe there is the possibility he would have worked as a playwright or novelist or something of the sort.”

“Now that you mention it, I’ve heard many writers are eccentrics. That would suit him.”

“Isn’t that rather rude?” Nephy let out a sigh even as she protested

Chastille's words.

"...Still, if Master Zagan did not become a sorcerer, then we would never have met, right?"

"Yeah, I would've been dead already."

Plus, Nephy would have never regained her will to live.

"In the end, I really cannot think of Master Zagan as anything but a sorcerer."

"You're right. Being a sorcerer definitely suits him best."

And so, the two girls earnestly nodded in agreement.

The Elf and the Collar

"...What is this?"

The dark-skinned elf, Nephteros, was glaring at her master as if she were looking at a piece of trash. And in response, Archdemon Bifrons let out a laugh as if finding her question strange.

"It's a present. Zagan's elf seemed to be quite happy wearing a collar, so doesn't that mean you elves like having one around your necks?"

Her master held a cold, iron collar out to her. It was decorated with beautiful ornaments, but it was still something that was worn by a slave.

"That is simply a matter of Nephelia's tastes, not mine."

"Now now, don't be like that. Here, try it on."

The Archdemon forced the collar into Nephteros' hand, then turned and left. Even when she called out to stop them, Bifrons did not turn around.

What are you telling me to do with this thing...?

If she wore a collar and someone pulled on it, it would be difficult to breathe and hurt her neck. If a chain were attached to it, she wouldn't be able to resist either. And above all else, it was humiliating. Right as Nephteros was about to throw away the repulsive object her master handed to her, she suddenly came to a stop.

Why does Nephelia wear this kind of thing, I wonder...?

It was difficult to understand, but it was true that the high elf was happy about having that collar around her neck.

Happiness... Nephteros understood the meaning of that word, but she had no memory of truly experiencing the emotion.

Nephteros looked over her surroundings nervously. Only Nephteros and her master lived in this place, and that master had just vanished somewhere. She thought it impossible, but perhaps elves truly did feel some sense of relief or euphoria from having one around their necks. Plus, it would have been rude to just throw out a gift from

her master, so just once shouldn't have been an issue.

After returning to her room, Nephteros tried putting on the collar in front of a mirror. She couldn't tell whether it suited her or if it was making her happy. However, a rather exhilarating feeling shot through her.

"...How stupid."

"Oh my, it really does suit you after all, doesn't it?"

Nephteros jumped upon hearing her master's voice suddenly call out to her. Then, she quickly disposed of the collar.

"Oh dear, there's no need to be so shy."

This is all Nephelia's fault!

That was how Nephteros had to justify the situation in order to protect her own mind and soul.

A Present for the Small Dragon

"Zagan, I want a collar like Nephys's."

"Pfft!" Black tea burst from Zagan's mouth as he heard such an unexpected remark from his daughter. And while he used sorcery to restore his now wet grimoire to its original state, Zagan collected himself and inquired further.

"What brought this up?"

"Nephy treats her collar preciously. She says it's her treasure. I want something like that too."

Nephy's collar was certainly a treasure in her eyes, but objectively, it was little more than a slave collar. And so, Zagan was hesitant to put one around his daughter's neck. He scratched his head, clearly confused, when it dawned on him that he had never once given his daughter a present.

"There's no need for it to be a collar, right? Isn't the anything you want?"

"Hm... I want something cute."

Are you telling me to look for something even cuter than you?

"Something cute... huh? Oh, how about this?"

Zagan agonized over the dreadfully unreasonable request for quite a while. Luckily, his wandering gaze stopped as he spotted one of the books on his bookshelf.

"What's this, a picture book?"

Zagan pulled an old and tattered picture book off the shelf. It was something that looked totally out of place inside the castle of an Archdemon. And even putting that aside, it was far too tattered to give as a gift. Still, for whatever reason, Zagan picked this out specifically for her.

"I first learned how to read thanks to this..." Zagan was illiterate

for much of his childhood. He first learned to read when another orphan gave him that picture book, which was why he was unable to let it go. Zagan wasn't someone who took pride in his ability to teach, but he believed that book was something that could help his daughter.

It was questionable whether a young dragon would have any fun looking at a human picture book, but Foll took hold of the picture book regardless, sparkles in her eyes as she let out an 'ohhh' with a sigh of admiration.

"D-Do you like it?"

"Yep. The pictures are cute."

"That's..."

Foll sat on the ground and began reading the picture book as Zagan looked on with a strained smile.

"A long, long time ago, there was a heinous sorcerer. He dominated the nearby village and—"

It was a little late, but Zagan realized he may have chosen the wrong gift. And though he had doubts, his daughter's voice was so joyous that he decided not to worry.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 3
by Fuminori Teshima

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Edited by DxS

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